Snapshots on the Long Road Home

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Snapshots on the Long Road Home

by Jo (jmathieson)

Summary

Clint Barton and Phil Coulson learned to work together and to trust each other, through years of dangerous missions. And during those years they went from being colleagues to friends, and eventually lovers.

Snapshots on the Long Road Home is the story of that journey for Clint & Phil. Of the missions, the danger, the growing trust. Their road home to each other isn't smooth, but by following it they find love.

Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE: This story is tagged "***Author Chooses Not to Warn***" because I have decided not to spoil the plot by putting the warnings in the tags. **ALL the Content Warnings are in the END NOTES for this chapter**. If you have triggers (or simply prefer to know what you're getting into), please, PLEASE go read the End Notes.

Thank You a thousand times to the many, many people who helped this story finally see the light! Especially thanks to: NegativeSpaceWalk, shaenie, ralkana, shazorlane, salamanders_scribe, the whole gang at Strike Team Clint Coulson, gqgqqt, and my always supportive husband, TheExclamation.

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See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: The First Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The First Year

It was Clint's fourth op with SHIELD, and his first with the legendary Agent Coulson. Clint refused to admit to himself that he was a tiny bit nervous. The things he'd heard in the mess hall about Coulson ranged from obvious exaggeration to outright fantasy. But no matter how many stupid jokes about the man being a robot were told behind his back, Clint had noticed that everyone seemed to prepare a little more carefully and stand a little straighter when they were heading out on an op led by Coulson.

'Anyway,' Clint thought, 'it's not like this mission is going to be any different from the last three. Agent Robot will stick me somewhere stupid, and I'll watch the action go down through my scope, and then I'll come back and write a dumb report as if I was actually involved in the damn op.'

Clint's suspicions were confirmed when he learned that he was the third sniper (that is to say, the second backup) on the team. They were standing around in a small hotel conference room. The techies were fiddling with radio and surveillance equipment in one corner, and the rest of them gathered around the big aerial maps that Coulson had spread out on the table. Clint paid the minimum necessary attention while Coulson explained the mission background, i.e. who the bad guy was, and why they were taking him out.

"I want one clean shot with absolutely no chance of collateral damage. Is that clear? This guy's important, but not important enough to risk civilian casualties. We'll get him some other time if necessary," Coulson said.

"Yeah, sure, some other time after he's imported another ton of heroin into the country, and killed a few more fourteen-year-old Albanian sex-slaves," said one of the other agents quietly. But not quietly enough, because Coulson turned on him.

"You will follow my orders to the letter or you're off this mission as of right now. Is that understood, Agent Evans?" Coulson's tone was perfectly calm, which made him sound even more threatening, somehow.

"Understood, sir," said Evans, standing up straighter. Clint didn't bother hiding his smirk, and Evans shot him a murderous look.

"Agent Diaz, you're on top of this building." Coulson pointed to the map, and Clint instantly focused one-hundred-percent of his attention on the briefing. "Evans, you're here: sixth story fire escape. And Barton, you're here: on top of this warehouse."

Diaz and Evans both said "Yes, sir," but Clint just kept staring at the map, annoyed, as usual, about the stupid spot that he had been assigned. So much for Super-Agent Coulson being any different.

"Barton?"

"Yeah?" Clint looked up to find Coulson's eyes on his. They were steel blue, Clint noticed, with little flecks of brown.

"If you have a comment, Specialist, I'd like to hear it," Coulson said evenly.

Clint held Coulson's gaze and tried to decide what to do. Despite (or maybe because of) Coulson's reputation, his words actually sounded genuine to Clint. He could see three ways in which the other two snipers could potentially be blocked - and the guy they were meant to be taking down was a sex-slave trafficker, after all. Clint had some sympathy for Evans' earlier outburst. It was better to get this fucker now if they could. 'What the hell, it's not like Coulson's going to remember I exist anyway; I might as well make a fool of myself,' Clint thought.

"I think there's a better spot. Here." Clint pointed to a building one block back from Coulson's original choice.

"That would put you almost 30 meters further from the target's location." But Coulson's tone sounded like a comment rather than a criticism, so Clint soldiered on.

"Closer to 50, actually, because I'd be 12 meters higher up, on this ledge, but that would allow me to clear this building here, and give me a viewable angle of 75 degrees, rather than the 60 degrees I'd get from the other spot."

"And could you still make the shot from there, if necessary?" Coulson's voice held no doubt; it was just a request for information.

"Yes," Clint said simply, thinking 'I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise, dumbass. Jesus fuck, it's only 700 meters. Who the fuck does this guy think I am? But hey, he looks like he's actually considering what I said...' And sure enough, Coulson nodded.

"Okay, Barton, use your chosen spot. Anyone else have anything to contribute? No? Alright then, move out. Check in on the comms when you're set."

As they moved out, Clint overheard a muttered comment from Evans to Diaz: "It's not like he's going to be needed anyway, so Coulson may as well let him perch wherever he wants." But Clint noticed that Diaz turned away from Evans as if she wasn't all that interested in being a part of the conversation.

Clint ignored the other two snipers. He turned to jog out to his chosen spot and climb up to his perch.

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"Diaz, do you have the shot?"
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"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Evans do you have the shot?"

"No, fuck. I'm blocked by one of the bodyguards. I could take him out first, and then get the target, or Diaz could..."

"Stand down, Evans." Coulson's voice was clipped and he sounded annoyed. "Barton, do you have the shot?"

"Yes." There was a pause, and Clint wondered if there was something else he was supposed to say.

"Take the shot, Barton."

Clint breathed in and out once, slowly, then squeezed the trigger. The man dropped.

"Target confirmed down," came Coulson's voice over the comms a moment later. "Ground team go in. Good work, Barton. Rendezvous for debrief in five, everyone."

Back in the conference room, Clint very carefully kept his face completely neutral. He had already pissed off enough people here that he knew any comment he made would probably be construed, by Evans at least, as gloating. Besides, Clint didn't actually like shooting people, even people who deserved it. And he really hated having to talk about it afterwards. Mercifully, Coulson's idea of a debrief was short and amounted to: "I want to know exactly what went wrong and exactly what went right and I want to read it in your very accurate and detailed mission reports. Which will be on my desk by oh-nine-hundred tomorrow. Dismissed."

As he stood in the showers back on base, Clint replayed it in his head, just once.

"Good work, Barton."

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Later that evening, Phil was in the cafeteria picking up a coffee and a couple of left-over Danishes to see him through the next few hours of post-mission paperwork. He noticed Barton at a table in the far corner. The remains of a meal were scattered around him, and he was hunched over some papers. Phil was struck by how tense his posture was. In the keyed up aftermath of the op, Barton had been relaxed to the point of lounging against a wall during debrief, but now Phil could see the tension in his body from across the room. Some flash of intuition told Phil that Barton was writing his mission report longhand.

Phil spoke quietly to the server behind the counter as he paid for his snack. "Any idea how long he's been there?"
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"I served him just after the dinner rush at, around quarter-to-six maybe? He's been there ever since."

Three hours. Phil silently moved to a spot where he could see Barton more clearly. He watched the painfully slow progress of Barton's pencil across the page for a couple of minutes before leaving just as quietly.

Barton's mission report was sitting on the floor of his office when Phil got in the next morning, having obviously been slipped under the door. Out of abject curiosity, Phil picked it up and started reading, even before he had put his coffee down on his desk or turned on his computer. Ten minutes later, Phil was reading Barton's past mission reports, then his previous handler's assessments, then his IQ test results and his background file.

In another stroke of intuition, instead of sending Barton a meeting request using SHIELD's email calendaring system, Phil picked up his phone and spoke to Greg Mitchell, the administrative assistant he shared with Sitwell and two other senior handlers. "Please have Agent Barton report to my office as soon as possible. You have my authorization to use the security monitors to locate him if necessary."

Ten minutes later there was a knock on his office door.

"Come in," Phil called. Specialist Third Grade Clinton Francis Barton came into his office, and stood halfway between the desk and the door, looking around with detached curiosity, and definitely not in any semblance of the 'at attention' stance that Phil Coulson usually got from junior agents, no matter their background.

"Agent Barton, I appreciate the effort you put into your very complete mission report," Phil said, making a conscious effort to put some warmth into his tone so that Barton would know he wasn't being facetious.

"Thanks." Barton's attention focused on Phil, and it seemed like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"However, I require you to submit your mission reports electronically from now on. That way you can't get ketchup on them." Phil kept his face perfectly straight and his voice neutral. He wasn't in any way teasing or belittling Barton, just stating a fact.

"I'm, uh, not very good with computers."

"That's not a problem. I'll walk you through the process." Again, Phil tried for a warm, easy, reassuring tone.

"Um, you've probably got, uh, more important things to do." Barton's eyes darted around, looking for an escape.

"Barton, I want you to submit your mission reports electronically, which makes it my responsibility to show you how to do that. You have a SHIELD-issued laptop?"

"Yeah. It's in my quarters."

"Go get it."

"Uh..."

"Now, Barton." Phil turned back to his computer, making it very clear that he expected the order to be followed without further discussion. Barton was still for a moment, then shrugged and left Phil's office.

Six minutes later, Barton was back, carrying his laptop. Phil set him up on the sofa that sat to one side of his office with his laptop on the small coffee table to the right of Phil's desk.

"Log in."

Phil watched as Barton hunted-and-pecked his way through the sign-in screens with his username, SHIELD ID number and password. Because he was watching carefully, Phil realized that Barton was actually having to look for the letters on the keyboard.

'He's never actually typed before. That's the first problem to solve,' Phil thought. What he said was, "Give me a minute here, Barton."

On his own terminal, Phil did a quick search of SHIELD's extensive educational materials for 'Typing tutorial software.' He scanned through a few before selecting the one he thought would suit Barton best. He also noticed that during the five minutes it took him to do that, Barton just sat, waiting. Not asking questions, or looking nervous, or fidgeting. Just waiting for the next thing to happen.

"First things first, let's get your typing up to speed," Phil said. He showed Barton how to access the program on the network drive, being careful to explain each step clearly.

The software (which was aimed at middle-schoolers and had optional spelling and vocabulary modules) started to explain hand position in a cheery voice, and Phil went back to his desk. He opened a bottom drawer and searched through it. By the time Phil was back at Barton's side, he was already typing 'add' 'lad' 'fad' and 'had' to blow up little alien spaceships that drifted down the screen with words in them. Phil handed Barton a pair of earbuds, and watched as Barton took his hearing aid out and slipped it into the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. He plugged the earbud in its place, leaving the other to dangle on its cord.

Coulson went back to his desk and emailed Jasper Sitwell: "In ten minutes, come to my office with something urgent that will take about an hour, please."

Sure enough, ten minutes later, Jasper poked his head into Phil's office, and Barton looked up from his typing.

"Phil, I need to talk to you about a situation. It may take a while," Sitwell said, carefully not betraying anything with his face or voice.

"I can go do this in my room." Barton moved to stand up, but Phil waved a hand at him.

"No, you stay here. I still need to work on the mission reports with you when I'm through with Jasper's situation. In fact, come sit here at my desk while I'm out."

"No, that's okay. Really, I'm fine here."

"You're absolutely not fine there. Typing hunched over the coffee table like that is terrible for your hand position and there's no way I'm letting one of SHIELD's best snipers get RSI on my watch. Move your laptop over here," Phil said, clearing space on his desk and logging out of his own computer. Barton shrugged, paused the program, and picked up his laptop.

"Right, I'll be back when this situation is resolved." Phil glanced around his office once, nodded, and left with Sitwell.

"Thanks, Jasper," he said as they headed down the corridor.

"Any time, you know that. You gonna tell me what that was about?"

"Have you ever read one of Barton's mission reports?"

"Barton's weather reports, you mean? Yeah, a couple. Why?"

Phil couldn't help but smile at Jasper's description of Barton's after-actions as 'weather reports.' Barton always noted not only the height above ground that he was perched at and the distance to target, but also the temperature, wind direction and speed, ceiling, and visibility.

"Ever wondered how he knows the wind speed twelve stories up the side of an apartment building in Manhattan?"

"No. Can't say that I have. How?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked him yet. Neither has anyone else, I bet. He's good, Jasper. He's really very good, and the attitude... I think there's more to it than meets the eye. He handed in, on time I might add, a ketchup-stained mission report handwritten in pencil."

Sitwell chuckled. "Yeah, that's Barton all right."

"The ketchup was because he wrote it in the mess hall. He's living in temp quarters, and the desks there are about twenty inches wide. Enough room for a laptop, but damned cramped to write an after-mission report on by hand."

"Well, why wasn't he doing them on his laptop?"

"Why," Phil said, stopping in the corridor and turning to his friend. "Do we assume that SHIELD recruits don't know how to pick a lock, or shake a tail, but we do assume they know how to type and what a network share is?"

"Ah."

"His IQ tests high, but he's barely got a middle-school education. On the op I just led, he could extrapolate his angle-of-view from an overhead satellite photo. On the range, he's the best shot in SHIELD history, but in the four months since he made full Agent, no one has given him the chance to use his skills. I had him as second back-up on that op, but only

because I always plan for every possible contingency, so I just requested whoever had the highest marksmanship scores. And it's damn lucky I did."

"You've got a new pet project, then." Jasper said, and they both started walking again.

"Yes, well, I just hate to see a potentially superb asset get wasted through poor personnel management," Phil said.

"Yeah. Sure. Everyone else sees a ketchup-stained report and assumes carelessness and disrespect for procedures and authority, but not Agent Coulson. No, he figures out what's really going on, and has a five-point plan to fix it in place by," Sitwell glanced at his watch, "oh-nine-forty." Sitwell's wide grin let Phil know just how much he was enjoying the teasing he was dishing out. "And the fact that he's kind of cute in a bad-boy-slash-lost-puppy sort of way doesn't have anything to do with it either, I suppose."

"Jasper." Phil's voice went cold and hard.

"Sorry, Phil. I just thought... never mind. Forget I said anything. Sorry, buddy." Jasper bumped Phil's shoulder with his, and they kept on walking.

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To: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
From: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
Subject: test email
Attachment: Certificate.jpg

Hi Coulson. I just wanted to check that I remembered how to do the attachment thing you showed me so please tell me if this works OK. I finished the typing program and at the end it made this thing. Clint Barton.

To: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
From: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
Subject: Re: test email

Barton,

Your email attachment worked just fine. Congratulations on finishing the typing program. 48 words-per-minute is excellent.
~~~~~~

Phil Coulson,
Agent, Strategic Planning and Response
S.H.I.E.L.D.

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"Foster - any sign of the target?"

"No, sir."

"Diaz - what do you see?"

"Nothing yet, sir."

"Barton - anything?"

"I still can't see shit, because I've still got a fucking awning blocking me."

Clint sat perfectly still and kept his face completely blank as the tape of the mission played. It didn't look anything like the courtrooms he'd been hauled into as an eleven-year-old juvenile delinquent, but Clint was pretty damn sure that that's what it was. Fury, Coulson, and two other people he didn't know were sitting on one side of a big conference table with folders, notepads, and computers in front of them. And he was sitting on the other side of the table along with Diaz, Foster, and Henderson. There was a tech guy at the end of the table running the audio and video, which projected on a big screen behind him. But it sure felt like a courtroom.

'That's because I'm up on charges of Disobeying a Direct Order in the Field, I guess,' Clint thought, and wondered if they'd let him keep the clothes he was wearing when they kicked him out.

"I've got movement." Foster's voice sounded even more edgy on the recording than Clint remembered.

"Wait until my order, Foster. We need to be sure he's the right guy."

"I see him now too, sir. He's coming out with two - no, make that three bodyguards. They're covering him pretty good, sir, I don't know if I'm going to get a shot from my location." That was Diaz.

"Foster, what do you see?"

"I got him, and it looks like our guy."

"Barton, can you confirm?"

"No, because I can't see a goddamn thing."
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"Okay, Foster, get ready to take the shot. Diaz and Barton, be ready to back him up."

"I don't have the shot, sir. He's blocked by one of the bodyguards. They're moving towards the car - we're going to lose them." Foster's voice was high and tight.

"Diaz, do you have the shot?"

"No, sir. I'm blocked."

"Barton, do you have the shot?"

"No."

"I thought you were supposed to be good, Barton."

"I am good. I'm the best. But I can't see through a fucking awning. Fuck it, I'm outta here."

"They're moving. I think I can get a shot." Foster again, sounding much more agitated than a sniper ever should.

"Take the shot if you can get it, Foster. Don't wait for my-"

"We've got civilians coming into range." Clint wondered, as he listened to his own voice cut in, if there was anything—anything at all—he could have said that would have actually gotten through to the idiot that was handling the op.

"Foster, take the shot if you can get it."

"Dammit - there's a big group of people - tourists it looks like, they're just about to come around the corner. Fuck, Henderson, it's some sort of school group. They're teenagers - kids!"

"I've got the shot, what do I do?"

"Take the shot, Foster."

"Foster, no!"

Clint remembered the sinking feeling in his gut as he heard Foster's shot ring out, just as the group of Japanese teenagers turned the corner onto the street that suddenly erupted in a firefight.

"I'm taking fire!" The panic was clear in Foster's tone, and for a second, Clint felt sorry for him.

"Pause." Director Fury's voice cut through, and the recording stopped.

"Specialist Foster, would you please tell us in your own words what happened after you took the shot, as ordered by Agent Henderson."

"I... I took the shot, and then I could see through my scope that one of the bodyguards was swinging around and pointing his gun at me, so I ducked."

"What type of gun was he pointing at you, Specialist?"

"Um, a handgun. I don't know... I don't remember what kind." Foster fidgeted in his seat and glanced at Diaz for help. "It all happened pretty fast, sir, I just saw the gun and then ducked behind the parapet of the building, and then I heard shots."

"I see." Fury's voice was flat. "Thank you. Specialist Diaz, please tell me everything you saw from the moment you heard Agent Henderson give Specialist Foster the order to take the shot."

"Sir, I saw the target go down. And then the bodyguards raised their weapons and engaged. One was aiming at Specialist Foster's location, and so I tried to line up a shot on him, but before I could line up my shot, he was shot in the head and went down. I assumed Specialist Barton was responsible for that, sir. So I looked for the other two bodyguards. One was firing at Specialist Foster's location and the other was firing, well, at random. Then I saw a third man climbing out of the back of the vehicle with an automatic weapon, which I believe was an M16. I heard another shot and another one of the bodyguards went down. The man with the automatic weapon started to fire, and he was moving very erratically. I... I wasn't sure I could get him. The other remaining bodyguard had taken cover behind the vehicle, and he appeared to be firing on Specialist Foster's location. I had a shot on him, so I took it and was successful. After which, I heard another shot and saw that the man with the automatic weapon was down."

"Thank you, Specialist Diaz." Fury nodded and turned to Clint. "Specialist Barton, could you please confirm that you neutralized three of the bodyguards with three shots, as described by Agent Diaz."

"Um... Yeah."

"Thank you, Specialist Barton." And that was it. Fury turned away from Clint and back to the tech. "Please resume the recording."

"*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Get the ground team in. Someone contain those civilians. Fuck, Barton, we were supposed to detain one of the bodyguards for questioning, and you've fucked that up by shooting them all. I'm gonna have your ass for this. Get back here, now. All of you - get your asses back here now. Foster, you okay?"*

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Good. Get back here. What a fucking mess. Ground teams, report."

"Pause please." It was Coulson who stopped the recording this time. His face was completely neutral when he turned to Clint, "Specialist Barton, when did you become aware that the mission objectives included detaining one of the target's bodyguards for questioning?"

"When Agent Henderson said it on the radio after all the shooting."

"It wasn't part of the pre-mission briefing?"

"Um... I don't think so. I mean, if it was, I don't remember." Clint couldn't swear that Henderson hadn't mentioned it, but he was pretty sure he'd have remembered something like that.

"Specialists Diaz and Foster, was the fact that the mission objectives included detaining one of the target's bodyguards for questioning part of the pre-mission briefing?" Fury was asking now.

"Umm. I don't know." Foster shot a glance at Henderson. "I don't remember."

"Specialist Diaz?"

"As far as I remember, there was no mention of it, sir." Diaz's voice was quiet, but strong.

"Thank you," Fury said. "Do any other members of the tribunal have any other questions?"

"I have one more." Clint looked at Coulson, who had addressed Director Fury, but who was now looking directly at him. "Specialist Barton, would you please tell me: If you had been aware that mission objectives included detaining one of the target's bodyguards for questioning, would you have done anything differently?"

Clint looked at Coulson, considering the question and wondering what Coulson was digging for. After a couple of seconds, Clint let his eyes slip closed. After a few more, he heard Coulson's voice, "Specialist Barton?"

"Sorry. I was trying to remember exactly where the guy with the Kalashnikov was, which direction he was firing in, and the range to where the kids were, at the time I took the shot. I..." Clint figured that the right answer was to say, 'Of course, if I had known I would have shot him in the shoulder or the kneecap rather than the head.' But Coulson had asked the question, and Coulson had been straight with him so far, so Clint couldn't bring himself to lie, not even to save his own skin.

"I don't know. I might have risked a non-lethal shot. But he had a Kalashnikov, and there were kids in range... So probably not." Clint shrugged but held Coulson's gaze.

Coulson seemed oddly satisfied with the answer. "Thank you, Specialist Barton."

"Specialists Foster, Diaz, and Barton, you are dismissed for now," Fury said. "Remain on base; you'll be recalled for the results of this hearing before the end of the day." Fury gave a nod that was obviously meant to encompass the three of them and turned his attention to Henderson as they got up and left.

Outside the conference room, Foster started to babble. "I think that went okay, don't you guys? I think it's Henderson that they're after. I mean he obviously fucked up. I think we did fine. They can't blame us."

Diaz rolled her eyes at Foster, and Clint gave her a crooked grin, then shrugged and headed for the cafeteria. If he was going to be kicked out of SHIELD, at least he could get one last

free meal while he was still wearing the uniform.

Three hours later Coulson's admin assistant found Clint in the lounge, playing Space Invaders on the retro console.

"They want you back in Conference Room 3," said Mitchell, his expression unreadable.

"Okay, thanks." Clint headed towards the conference rooms, and Diaz joined him he rounded a corner.

"Don't worry. You didn't do anything wrong," she said, punching him lightly on the shoulder and giving him what he assumed was meant to be a reassuring smile.

"Since when does that make any difference to anything?" Clint said, not bothering to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

Once they were back in their seats, Fury addressed them. "Specialists Foster and Diaz, this hearing finds that neither of you acted improperly in carrying out your duties during this mission. Thank you for your testimony. Dismissed."

Diaz looked like she wanted to say something, but people didn't tend to hang around after Director Fury had dismissed them, so she followed Foster out of the room.

"Specialist Barton. You are commended for your excellent work in neutralizing the threat to civilians—civilian children—during this mission. The charge of disobeying an order in the field has been found to be baseless, and your record will reflect that. However in future, use more precise language when signaling a change in your position during an operation." Fury stopped talking.

Clint blinked. He didn't understand. They were siding with him? And what was that about language? Surely there was something else. "Um... sorry? I'm not sure I understand," he said.

"In the future, if you are changing position during an operation, you announce it as 'Specialist Barton relocating to the north-west corner of the roof' and not 'Fuck it, I'm outta here.' Is that understood?" Fury's face held not a trace of emotion, so Clint still couldn't tell what the hell was going on.

"Um... yeah."

"Good. Dismissed, Barton."

Clint glanced at Coulson, who gave him the tiniest of nods, so he stood up and walked out, still not really understanding what had just happened. He found Diaz waiting for him in the hall outside the conference room.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Fine. I... They believed us I guess, about the mission objective, I mean. That Henderson didn't tell us. 'Commended' is good, right?"

"Yeah, it's good. It's like a gold star for good work. Fury said you were commended?"

"For taking out the bodyguards before they managed to shoot any of the kids, I guess. Then he chewed me out for my language on the comms and dismissed me." Clint wasn't sure why he was telling Diaz all of this, except that maybe he couldn't quite believe he wasn't fired, and saying it out loud to someone else made it more real. Besides Diaz had been nice to him.

"I'm going out for a beer with Foster. He's still pretty freaked out. You want to come?"

"No thanks. I'm gonna go to the range and shoot for a bit. Thanks for inviting me, though." If he was going to be sticking around, maybe he should try making friends with some of his fellow snipers. The nice ones, at least.

"Sure. See you later, Barton."

"Yeah. Later."

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"Some people just aren't cut out for handling operations," Phil said, shaking his head and squaring up a stack of papers in front of him.

"True. I had hopes for Henderson, though. He was a good field agent," Fury said as he snapped his laptop closed. He and Phil were the only ones left in the conference room, Henderson having been dismissed and Hill and the others leaving soon after.

Fury moved a pile of files and picked a folder off the bottom of a stack.

"You wrote this before the hearing even started. You must have been pretty sure what the results were going to be." Fury was looking straight at Phil, daring him to disagree.

"I listened to the recording of the mission communications."

"Of course you did. It's not standard procedure to assign a permanent handler to a Junior Specialist." Fury didn't give a fuck about standard procedure, and Phil knew it.

"I think he would benefit from the stability. His life's been... chaotic up until now." Phil was playing it as low-key as he could. He didn't want this turning into a big thing.

"That's one way of putting it. You seem quite sure that he's going to be worth your time and effort." One of Fury's fingers tapped the file with Barton's name and service number on it.

"I don't want to see us waste a good asset," Phil said, keeping his face neutral, even though he knew Fury could probably see right through him.
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"Come on, Cheese, don't try to tell me this is just about operational efficiency. You see something in him."

"Okay, yes. He... he's never gotten a break. Ever. He's smart and he works hard and takes direction well if it's presented in the right way; a way that doesn't make him feel like you're talking down to him. And even if he wasn't the best marksman in history, he'd still be worth the effort. I honestly think he's got the potential to be one of SHIELD's top assets." Phil stopped himself from crossing his arms over his chest as he spoke.

"And the fact that he's just your type doesn't have anything to do with it, I suppose." Fury's expression was still blank, but there was a sparkle in his eye that Phil recognized.

"Nothing has changed since my last psych eval, Nick."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It is what it is." Phil said, relaxing now that he knew Fury wasn't going to press him any further. "I guess it's just what you said. I see something in him."

"Okay, I'm going to approve your assignment as his handler. I want to see some results though - no more crap like today."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to do much about his language on the comms, but I'll try to keep him away from fucking awnings from now on." Coulson cracked a small smile, and Fury laughed out loud.

"Go. And good luck."

"Thanks."

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To: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
From: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
Subject: Meeting with P. Coulson

Barton,

Please report to my office at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow.

Phil Coulson,
Agent, Strategic Planning and Response
S.H.I.E.L.D.
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"Come in," Coulson called when Clint knocked a 'rat-a-tat-tat' on his door at 9:03 a.m.

"Sit down please," he said when Clint walked in. He sat in one of the two visitor chairs that faced Coulson's desk. "Director Fury has assigned me as your permanent handler."

'Of course,' thought Clint, 'I knew yesterday couldn't be the end of it. So what does that mean?' He said the last part aloud. "What does that mean?"

"It means that all of your assignments will come through me from now on. Instead of being in the general pool, and being pulled in for any operation being run by anyone, requests will come to me and I will approve or deny them. I'll be making sure that we're using your skills effectively."

"Okay. I guess." Clint wasn't exactly sure what that meant, except that maybe he'd be doing fewer ops, if Coulson was going to deny the ones that he didn't think Clint could handle.

"You will be working on my operations as often as is practical, and I will be reviewing the results of all the operations that you're on that I'm not leading."

Clint suddenly got it. Coulson had been assigned as his babysitter. After that last op, no matter what Fury had said at the hearing, it was obvious they didn't trust him in the field. So Coulson's job was to watch him and make sure he didn't screw up again. He was glad it was Coulson, because the guy seemed pretty straight up. He thought maybe Coulson would at least give him the benefit of the doubt. Sucked for Coulson, though, getting a crappy babysitting assignment.

"I'm sorry," Clint said, and he genuinely was.

"What for?"

"That you got stuck babysitting me. I'll try not to fuck up again."

"Barton, that's not what this is about. You didn't do anything wrong on your last assignment. You made the best out of a bad situation, and your actions probably saved civilian lives. My being your permanent handler is so that we can best use your particular skills..." But maybe Coulson could see the skepticism in his eyes because he changed the subject.

"I will also be overseeing your training from now on, deciding what courses and training exercises you should be on. I get the impression that you haven't had much to do in the last few months."

"Um, no. A couple of big exercises, but that's about it." Clint was sitting with his hands loose on his knees, still trying to work out what all this meant.

"Well I'm going to start keeping you busier than that."

"Good." The word was out of Clint's mouth before he could bite it back.

"Have you been bored, Specialist Barton?"

"I don't have a whole lot to do between missions and exercises," Clint said with a shrug. "I work out in the gym, I spend a couple of hours a day on the range, but aside from that. I... uh... I was actually thinking about maybe asking you if there was anything else like the typing program that I could do during my downtime." Clint had in fact been gearing himself up to request a meeting with Coulson to ask about that. And as an excuse to see him again.

"I'm sure we can find a few things. Why don't you email me a list?"

"A list of what?"

"Things you'd like to learn. I don't know what you don't know, so I don't want to insult you by suggesting, for instance, that you should learn how to swim, or speak Spanish, for instance." Coulson sounded perfectly serious, like he actually cared about not hurting Clint's feelings.

"Mi aerodeslizador está lleno de anguilas," said Clint with a cocky grin.

"And swimming?" asked Coulson.

"Just well enough not to drown in a hot-tub." Clint delivered that line with an eyebrow waggle.

"Right, swimming lessons it is. I'll sign you up at the SHIELD pool. Send me a list by email. Do you have any questions?"

"No. I guess not."

"If you have any problems, you bring them to me. If you have trouble with procedures, or equipment, or people, or anything at all, you come and tell me and I'll deal with it. Okay, Barton?" Coulson said earnestly. He seemed to really mean it.

"Um, yeah. Okay, boss."

"I'm not your boss, I'm your handler."

"Right."

"Dismissed, Barton."

"Sure thing, boss." Clint threw Coulson a mock salute as he left.

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To: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
From: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
Subject: List

Hi boss. Here's the list of stuff I'd like to learn that you
wanted me to make:

More computer stuff
Spy stuff (like how to follow someone and not get caught)
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Safecracking (I'm pretty good at picking locks already)
Codes and things (do we still use those?)
Other languages (french? German? Russian? chinese?)
How to make a bomb
High school stuff (like geography and history and stuff, I guess)
Swimming (we already talked about it but just in case you forgot except I guess you don't forget much huh?)

Clint Barton.

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"How good is your Spanish, really?" Coulson had called Clint into his office late on a Monday afternoon, ten days after officially becoming his handler.

"It's okay. I can buy food and order drinks and get directions and understand most of what people say to me, if they talk slow and it's not complicated or technical. My accent marks me for a gringo, though."

"Yes, mine too. Here." Coulson tossed him a CD-ROM in a jewel case. "Brush up as much as you can for the next five days. If nothing critical comes up, we've got a mission in Mexico at the end of this week. Here's the preliminary briefing packet. Read everything carefully. Take notes on any questions you have. We'll meet tomorrow afternoon to go over everything. Got it?"

"Yes, boss." Clint picked up the thick file and resisted the urge to open it right away.

"That's all, Barton."

"Okay, boss."

The next day Clint spent two hours working on Rosetta Stone's Spanish language course CD, two hours reading the briefing file for the mission in Mexico, two hours in the gym, and only one at the range. Tap Harris, the Range Master, looked surprised when he turned his guns back in early.

"Got a mission to prep for," Clint said with a shrug, but he felt a small swell of pride as he said it. And then a surge of what he realized was gratitude toward Coulson for making him feel like that.

He got to Coulson's office a few minutes early for the meeting, possibly the first time he'd ever been early for anything in his life. He stopped at Mitchell's desk uncertainly.

"I... uh... I have a meeting with Coulson."
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"About the Mexico operation, yes, Specialist. He's not busy, go ahead and knock," said Mitchell, giving Clint a little nod.

Clint clutched the file folder under his arm, and checked (for the third time) that he had his notepad and a pen, and knocked on Coulson's office door.

"Come in, Barton," Coulson called.

"Hi, boss. I'm ready for our meeting."

"Good. Sit. You have something to take notes with?" Coulson asked, and Clint held up his notepad and pen.

"We leave on Friday. We're on the same flight to Mexico City, but we're traveling separately due to our covers. I'll be in Business Class and you'll be in Coach. Sorry about that."

"That's okay."

"The details of both our covers were in the file. Do you have any questions about them?"

"Um... not exactly about the covers."

"Ask anyway."

"Sort of? Um... how many other people are on this mission?" Clint hadn't been able to figure out, from the information he'd been given, if there was anyone else involved. It didn't seem like there was, but...

"None. This one is just you and me."

"Oh." Clint had no idea what to make of that.

"Is that a problem?"

"No. No, of course not. I just... All the missions I've been on so far have had a whole bunch of people." Now he felt stupid. Maybe most missions were handled by just a couple of agents? How the hell was he supposed to know?

"This is a covert intelligence-gathering mission, so the fewer people we have crashing around the better," Coulson explained.

"Yeah. Sure. Um..."

"What is it, Barton?"

"Is this mission... important?"

"Why do you ask?" Coulson's eyebrows went up, but at least he didn't look annoyed.

"Just something I overheard in the gym. I guess I said I was going on a mission and someone said something about it being a milk-run." Clint managed not to mumble his answer at the

floor.

"SHIELD doesn't do milk runs. We are not the FBI, investigating high-school students for Googling "semtex" or checking The Anarchist Cookbook out of the library. Did you read the mission briefing?"

"Yeah, of course I read it." Clint had read it three times. Not that he thought Coulson was going to test him on it or anything, but...

"Why are we going to Mexico?"

"To investigate this drug lord guy."

"And why is SHIELD interested in a Mexican drug lord?" Apparently he was being tested after all, but Coulson's voice was mild and patient.

"Because there's..." Clint closed his eyes for a minute and thought about everything he'd read in the folder. "There's something else going on with him. There are a bunch of rumors and whispers and people have disappeared for asking questions. The local authorities can't or won't do anything. No one knows what he's really up to, but he's got a compound and a huge amount of security, even for a drug lord, and the rumor is that he's hiding something there. Something other than drugs."

"Exactly," Coulson said with an approving nod, and Clint felt a combination of relief and pride at having got the right answer. "And it might be nothing — or nothing that concerns us, anyway. But it might be something, and we won't know until we go and find out. So you tell me, is this mission important?"

"I guess so."

"I need you to take this seriously, Barton. I need to know that you're going to follow my orders and have my back and trust that I know what I'm doing." Coulson was giving him a hard look now.

"Sorry, I didn't mean... It's just that I know I don't have a great reputation around here, and I just wondered if this was..." 'a real mission,' Clint thought, but didn't dare say. "Important," he finished lamely instead.

"Believe me, Barton, I have much, much better things to do than drag both our asses to Mexico for missions that aren't important. Got it?"

"Yes, boss."

"Good. Let's go over the rest of the plans..."

Coulson spent two hours going through the details of the mission step by step. Everything from checking in at the airport, to getting a cab to the hotel, to how they would meet once they were both in Mexico, to the travel arrangements out to the target location and the rough timeline for the intelligence gathering. Coulson explained the contingency plans, the safe-house, and made Clint memorize the phone number of the emergency dead-drop line.

"Jeez, this is real spy stuff," Clint said at one point, admiringly.

"Wasn't spy stuff on your list of things you wanted to learn?" Coulson asked.

"Yeah. But I guess I didn't think I'd be learning it in the field. I thought there'd be classes, or something."

"Oh, don't worry, there are lots of classes, and you'll go to some of them - after we get back from Mexico."

"Sure thing, boss."

The briefing continued as Coulson explained every detail of the operation, pausing regularly to make sure that Clint understood. He was careful to do it in such a way that Clint never felt dumb or talked down to, which was a first for him at SHIELD. Coulson also made it very clear that there was no such thing as a stupid question when it came to mission planning. By the end of the two-hour session, all Clint had to do was raise his eyebrows at Coulson to get a point re-explained to him.

Briefing finally over, Coulson sent Clint to the audio-visual department to collect the long-lensed camera he'd be carrying for his cover as a film location scout, and also using to spy on the target.

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An hour later and loaded down with a very large camera bag and a tripod, Clint stood at the intersection of two corridors, trying to decide what to do.

He really didn't want to fuck this mission up. Either Coulson had been putting on a great act, or he actually believed that it was important, and that Clint could do it. 'If I fuck this up,' Clint thought, 'there's no way I'm getting a second chance, not even from him.' Decision made, he headed for Coulson's office.

He was spared having to ask Mitchell if Coulson was available, because the man himself was standing next to his admin's desk, talking to Sitwell. Coulson looked up when Clint came over.

"Got all the equipment okay?"

"Got it, yeah," Clint said, trying to figure out how to explain. He wasn't comfortable ratting on someone, a guy who'd probably been with SHIELD for ages, especially in front of Mitchell and Sitwell.

"Problem?" asked Coulson with a raised eyebrow.
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"Um..." 'Fuck it,' Clint thought, 'I've decided which side I'm on.' "Yeah," he said, "problem. The guy who was supposed to be showing me how all this stuff works... well he seemed a lot more interested in telling me how expensive it all was, and how fragile, and how careful I needed to be not to break anything."

"He didn't show you how to use it?"

"Not really. He explained it, sort of. But he talked really fast, and I tried to ask questions, but..." Clint trailed off, feeling dumb.

"Right. 'Scuse me a minute, Jasper. Mitchell, get me the AV department head please."

Mitchell dialed, spoke quietly, and then handed Coulson the phone.

"Gilbert, Coulson here. Look, one of my agents was just down there picking up his equipment for the Mexico op, and I'm not happy with the instruction he was given on it. This is an important surveillance mission, and he hasn't worked with this type of equipment before. I don't want to tell you how to run your shop, but have you got someone down there who could explain things clearly and patiently, so that my agent can actually learn how to use the gear properly?

"Yes, I understand. Well, he needs to be told again, obviously. Or put him in the back room and get someone who can teach out front instead. Yes. Thanks, I'll send him back down now. My best to Diane." Coulson handed the phone back to Mitchell and turned to Clint.

"Back downstairs you go. Gilbert will either find someone who can teach you how to use that stuff properly, or he'll show you himself. And Barton," Coulson said as Clint turned away, "you made the right call. The AV technician fucked up, and you needed to tell me that so I could fix it."

"Right, boss." Feeling reassured, Clint nodded and left.

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Clint looked through the long lens of the camera, focusing on each building in turn to commit the compound's layout to memory before zooming in on the more likely targets. The mission had been a blast so far, and he was having more fun than he'd had in a long, long time. The flight to Guadalajara had been cool, with okay food and a couple of good movies. Clint had made friends with a pair of ten-year-old twins sitting in the row behind him ("We're fraternal twins, everybody always asks. If we were identical we'd both be girls or both be boys," the little girl had explained), and he had regaled them with tales of his circus days.

Checking into the hotel behind Coulson, pretending not to know him, and all the other spy stuff had been fun, too. Coulson had had to tell him repeatedly to keep the comms for
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mission-related communication only, because Clint had started chattering to him nonstop as soon as the door of his hotel room was closed.

"Okay, so, for the mission then, what do I do tonight?"

"Go out and walk around if you want to. Get something to eat, or order room service if you prefer; though it would be more in character for you to go get something on the street. Just don't stay out too late, we've got a long day tomorrow."

"Don't worry, Mom, I'll be home by curfew," Clint snarked.

When he climbed into the rental car the next morning with his photography gear, Clint's chatter had started up again, and continued as he went through the motions of stopping and shooting pictures of quaint villages, scenic vistas, and interesting-looking rock formations, all in the guise of his cover as a location scout for an independent film. Coulson got a 20-minute reprieve when Clint stopped for lunch at a roadside cafe/gas station, making fast friends with two boys playing soccer in the parking lot and giving them "Revenge of the Mutants" ball caps from his cover stock of movie advertising paraphernalia in the trunk.

An hour later, however, all was quiet. Clint had climbed up one particular rock formation, wedged himself invisibly behind a clump of cholla cactus, and started to survey the drug lord's compound.

"Barton, report." Coulson's voice came through his earpiece with a faint crackle.

"I'm in position, boss, checking out the compound now. The satellite pictures were pretty accurate, as far as I can tell. I'm trying to figure out what each of the buildings is, so I can focus in on the more important ones."

"How many people do you see?"

"I've seen five so far, three obvious sentries on the outer walls and two in the compound, a woman carrying food and a guy wearing bandoliers. I tell you, boss, it's like something out of a Sergio Leone movie down there."

"Give me a status update every fifteen or twenty minutes, just so I know you haven't passed out from heatstroke." Coulson's voice was businesslike, and Clint couldn't tell if the man was serious or not.

"Will do, boss."

Clint went back to his careful examination of the compound. Satisfied that he had the layout committed to memory, he started with a large building on the far right, finding windows, gaps between boards, ventilation holes, and other cracks that would let him get a glimpse of the building's interior via the camera's telephoto lens. Five minutes later he had decided it was a dormitory of some sort, taken a few pictures to back that up, and moved on to the next building. Office. Next. Cafeteria/canteen. Next...

"Barton, report."

"Sorry, boss. I was concentrating."

"Anything so far?"

"Nope. I've found the dorms, the cafeteria, and the laundry. There's a small building that seems to be some sort of office, but there's nothing suspicious-looking in there that I can see, just a couple of desks and computers - not even a safe; unless it's under the floor. I've still got three big buildings and a couple of smaller ones to check out though."

"Fine. Just keep me informed." There was a very mild reprimand in Coulson's tone, and Clint figured he deserved it. He was determined to keep better track of the time and check in properly from now on.

"Yes, boss."

Clint focused on the next building. It seemed to be some sort of garage or motor pool. There were three jeeps, a Lincoln Town Car, a bright yellow Humvee and one of those military-style transport trucks in it, as well as gas cans, a tool bench, extra tires, the usual. Next building. Jackpot!

Clint snapped pictures of the bricks of cocaine on the tables, the lab equipment in the corner, the piñatas they were using to smuggle the dope in (how original). Then he remembered that the drug stuff wasn't the point of the mission. They already knew the guy was a drug lord; they were looking for something else. Clint was about to move on to the next building when something caught his eye. He stopped, took a minute's rest from staring through the lens, blinked, drank some water, then put his eye back to the viewfinder and began to systematically search every corner of the drug warehouse. He was about to give up when he spotted something at the base of the back wall that made him stop breathing for a moment.

Clint refocused the lens and snapped a picture. Then refocused the lens again. He shifted his position slowly, carefully, silently, trying to get a better angle through the missing tile in the adobe roof. He snapped more pictures, then touched his earpiece and said, *"Hey, boss?"*

"Yes, Barton?"

"I think I found something."

"You think."

"Well, I can't get a real clear look at it, but I think it might be what this guy is supposed to be hiding that isn't drugs. I found those too, by the way."

"What is it?" Coulson sounded a little exasperated now, but Clint wasn't sure how to explain what he was seeing.

"Well, I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it looks like a long metal tube with that yellow symbol for radiation on it."

"The symbol for radiation. Are you sure?" Coulson's voice had gone serious and quiet.

"Pretty sure, yeah."

"Are there any other markings on it?"

"There's lettering, but I can't read it. It's not English. Or Spanish." Clint was peering through the long lens, trying to make out a word, or even just the first letter of one. *"In fact the letters don't look quite... Boss, it might be Russian."*

"Can you get a better look from your current position?"

"I can try. Do you want me to move closer if I can't?"

"Is there any decent cover closer?"

"No, not really."

"In that case stay where you are, take as long as you need, and get the best pictures you can. Then get out of there, and come back to the hotel. Understood?"

"Yes, boss."

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Two hours later Clint was back in the hotel buying a magazine, a bottle of Gatorade, and a chocolate bar from the stand in the lobby. Juggling his purchases and his camera equipment, he waited for the elevators. When a man in a business suit with steel-blue eyes came out of the elevator along with the other guests, Clint's elbow got jostled and his purchases tumbled to the floor along with the loud clatter of his camera tripod.

"Sorry, so sorry. My fault, here, let me help you," said the businessman.

"That's okay, no harm done. I've got it, thanks. Thanks." Clint carefully kept his grin concealed as Coulson expertly palmed the memory chip from the camera.

Clint had just climbed out of the shower when he heard the beeping from the comms unit that he had left on the bedside table.

"Sorry, boss. I was in the shower," he said, wrapping a towel around his waist.

"I'm sending the pictures you took for analysis. If they are what they look like, we might be asked to go back and try to get a better look. You need to call down to the front desk and extend your room for three more days."

"Sure thing. So, what do you think it is?"
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"Not something I want to discuss on the comms, Barton. Go get yourself some food, but stay close to the hotel. I'll be in touch as soon as I hear anything."

"Yeah, okay."

"Good work, Barton."

"Thanks, boss."

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Phil could hear the pleasure in Barton's voice as he said 'Thanks,' and marveled again at how he reacted to the smallest amount of genuine praise.

'The kind of life he must have led, to still be so surprised every time someone tells him he did well...' Phil thought as he went back to doing what work he could remotely over the half-secure cellphone link. Everything was triple-encrypted on both his laptop and the SHIELD servers, of course, but the wireless traffic was vulnerable to interception, and if someone wanted to spend enough time splicing data packets back together and decrypting them... Phil kept his work to housekeeping tasks; setting up training schedules for junior agents and reviewing equipment requests from senior ones. He called down for room service and half an hour later was picking unhappily at an overpriced pasta salad when his email alert sounded.

He clicked to see a message flagged "Urgent" and opened it to find two words: Go Black.

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Clint was just stepping back into his hotel room, stomach pleasantly full of authentic burritos, refritos, rice, and ginger beer when his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Steve?" asked a voice that was definitely Coulson's. Barton thought fast.

"Um... no. I think you might have the wrong number?"

"This isn't Steve Black?"

"No, it's not. You must have the wrong number."

"So sorry to bother you."

"No sweat."

Barton's heart was pounding. Coulson wouldn't call him for nothing. It was obviously some sort of code.

'Code for what, though?' he wondered, looking at his phone for any other clue. The incoming number was unfamiliar. Steve Black. Black... Shit!

'Black' was code for an op that was blown. Was their cover blown? Had someone followed him to or from the desert? Had someone spotted him with Coulson in the lobby of the hotel? Clint spent a few seconds trying to remember anything that looked out of place, but he couldn't think of anything. He took a deep breath and told himself to think clearly and remember Coulson's briefing instructions.

'Safe-house. I have to get to the safe-house.'

Being on the run was something Clint had experience with, so it didn't take him long to decide what to do next. Following the procedure he'd been taught as part of his SHIELD basic training, he bricked his cell phone. He quickly packed the camera and comms equipment into the spacious camera bag and stuffed some spare socks, underwear and t-shirts into the corners. He pulled a light blue long-sleeved shirt on over his black t-shirt, and slapped one of the bright red "Mutants" baseball caps on his head. He left the rest of his luggage and his cover's passport where it was. Glancing around the room, he was satisfied that it looked like he was planning to come back. He shouldered the camera bag and left the hotel.

Clint strolled casually down the street, pausing every so often to admire the view. A couple of times he even fished out the camera and took a couple of shots of buildings or 'local color'. He didn't wander for too long, though, because he wanted to get back to the market while it was still open. The big street market was quieter than it had been earlier when he had bought his dinner, but it was still bustling. He wandered from stall to stall, looking at the merchandise, and stopped at a hat vendor. Perusing the options, Clint chose tan leather herder's hat, haggling with the vendor in his basic Spanish for a discount if he offered his red "Mutants" ball cap in trade.

"It's going to be a very famous movie - we're going to be filming near here!" Clint felt bad about lying, but he figured his cover was more important right now. The vendor took the trade and Clint's money, and Clint strolled off wearing his new hat. At another stall he bought a cheap disposable phone and a prepaid SIM card. At a third he bought a large colorful woven basket and a doll dressed in traditional costume.

He spent the next ten minutes wandering around the market, pausing and negotiating with the vendors to let him take pictures of their stalls and wares. All the while keeping a very careful eye out for anyone who might be watching or following him.

Mostly satisfied that he didn't have a tail, he stopped at a cantina on the edge of the market. He chose a table that couldn't be seen from the door and ordered a beer. Taking out his camera, he fiddled with it for a bit, then took off the long-sleeved shirt and stuffed it, along with the doll, his new hat, and packaging from the cell phone into the basket. He shoved the basket into the corner under the table.

He sat back and drank his beer, carefully watching the door and what he could see of the street. When he didn't see anything suspicious, and was sure he wasn't being watched or followed, he made one call on the new phone to the dead drop number that Coulson had made him memorize. He left the number for the disposable phone he was using after the beep.

Ten minute later he went to the bathroom, taking his camera bag and new phone but leaving the basket behind. Sure enough, there was a back way out of the cantina, and he slipped out. Twenty minutes of working his way through the streets while making sure he wasn't being followed later, it was just starting to get dark. Taking advantage of the shadows, he made his way to the safe-house.

Coulson must have seen him coming because the door opened as he stepped up to it, intending to knock softly.

"Were you followed?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well done with the disposable phone, by the way."

"Thanks. It seemed like the thing to do." Clint wondered if he should explain the steps he had taken to avoid being followed, but he figured that Coulson would ask if he wanted to know.

"We need to keep watch for anything suspicious for the next couple of hours. We have to know if we're secure here. We should be, but we need to be sure." Coulson seemed intent on convincing Clint that the situation was serious.

"How did the op get blown?" Clint had to ask, even though he was afraid of finding out that it was his fault.

"It didn't. At least, not as far as I know."

"So why..."

"The thing you found, it might be an old Soviet nuclear torpedo."

"Shit."

"Exactly. So we're operating completely covert from now on. I need you to take watch for the next half-hour or so, while I check the supplies and equipment," Coulson said.

"Yeah, of course."

"Use all the windows, but try not to be seen from outside. If you see anything that doesn't look right—anything at all—call me."

"Sure, boss." And for the first time, Clint wished he could bring himself to say 'Yes, sir,' instead, to reassure Coulson that he was taking this seriously.

Coulson gave the curt little nod that Clint had already learned meant he was satisfied that his instructions were understood and were going to be carried out. Clint stepped to the side of the house's front window and started to quarter the street, memorizing the surrounding area and searching for anything out of place at the same time.

Clint could hear Coulson moving around the house, opening and closing drawers and cupboards. He was curious of course, but he kept his eyes on the window and scanned the street. Once the clock in his head told him it had been ten minutes, he moved to the window beside the front door, and scanned a different slice of the street. He heard a new set of noises from the dining room and risked a quick glance. Coulson was taking a laptop out of a large metal case. Another case, still closed, sat next to it on the table. Coulson's regular laptop case, the one he'd had on the plane, was on a chair. Clint turned his attention back to the street, looking very carefully for people loitering on corners, shadowy figures in doorways, or the brief flash of color that would indicate someone watching from a window the way he was.

"I'm making coffee. Do you want some? Or soda, or water?" Coulson called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, water would be good," Clint said. Then, thinking that if there was coffee and soda, there might be something other than water, "or Gatorade, or juice."

A minute later, Coulson handed him a bottle of orange juice.

"Great, thanks."

"All clear?"

"As far as I can see. If there's anyone out there watching us, they're better at hiding than I am at spotting them."

"How likely is that?" Coulson wasn't doubting him; he was asking for information. Clint liked that he could tell that.

"Not very, unless they're really, really good."

"Give it another twenty minutes or so."

"Sure thing, boss."

Twenty minutes later, Clint abandoned his post by the window and walked over to the table where Coulson had set up a laptop and some other equipment.

"As soon as it's full dark, I'm going to need you to go up on the roof and set this up in the most inconspicuous spot you can find," Coulson said, gesturing to something that looked like a very small satellite dish.

"No problem."

"Good. In the meantime, help yourself to whatever you want from the fridge. There's bread and cold cuts for sandwiches and some bean salad and plenty of water and juice."

"Yeah, okay. A sandwich sounds good." Dinner felt like hours ago. Clint looked at his watch. It was almost ten, so dinner had in fact been hours ago. He realized that Coulson might be hungry, too. "Uh, do you want me to make you a sandwich?"

"That would be very nice. Thank you, Barton."

Clint went into the kitchen and spent a few minutes locating plates and cutlery, investigating the contents of the fridge, and putting together a plate of sandwiches for both of them. He put the plate near Coulson's elbow, along with a fresh cup of coffee and a napkin.

Coulson smiled his thanks.

"I won't know for sure until you set up the satellite dish," Coulson said after a couple of bites of sandwich and a sip of coffee, "and we get secure communications established, but the usual procedure in a case like this would be to have us go back in and make a positive identification of the package, and do a thorough tactical assessment of the compound. If it is a nuclear missile, SHIELD will likely mount an op to retrieve it."

"Um, okay. This kind of thing happen often?" Clint was actually reassured by the fact that there was a 'usual procedure'.

"Not this exactly. But finding something very dangerous in the hands of someone who shouldn't have it, yes, that happens fairly often." Coulson glanced out the window, and then stood up and picked up the small satellite dish. He plugged one end of a reel of wire into it and handed it to Clint.

"You should be able to get up onto the roof from the back bedroom window. It needs to point northeast at an angle of about 60 degrees. Do you need to take a compass with you?"

"No. You showed me the safe-house on the map during the briefing. I know where north is."

"Good. If you can try to position it so that it isn't obvious from the street, that would be best."

"No problem."

Clint climbed out the window with the satellite dish in one hand and shimmied up onto the roof. Once he'd set up the dish and climbed back into the house, he found Coulson at the dining room table, typing.

"Nicely done, Barton. Comms are up. I'll be working here for a while, so take a break. Pick a bedroom and unpack, and there's a DVD player and some movies." Coulson waved his hand towards the sofa and TV in the living room, his eyes not leaving his computer screen.

Clint wandered over to the living room and perused DVD titles, then glanced back at where Coulson was typing rapidly on his laptop, brow furrowed in concentration. There was a bookshelf next to the rack of DVDs and Clint examined the selection. It was an odd combination of reasonably recent bestsellers and old paperbacks, as if someone had spent

half the book budget at Barnes & Noble and the other half at a church rummage sale. Clint found a Louis L'Amour he hadn't read and settled down on the sofa with it. A couple of hours later he got up and made another pot of coffee. He poured a cup for himself and put a second one down next to Coulson's elbow.

"Thanks." Coulson picked up his cup and took a sip, then paused as if he was surprised, and took another, longer drink. "You make good coffee, Barton," he said, looking and sounding sincere.

Clint didn't know how to react to that, but thankfully he didn't have to , because Coulson put his cup down and spoke. "No news from Headquarters yet. They're still analyzing the photos you took. I'll take first watch. I'll wake you in about four hours when I'm done here."

Barton glanced at the clock. It was just after 11 p.m., which meant he would get the 3 a.m. to 7 a.m. shift. Fair enough.

"Sure thing, boss. G'night." Clint took his coffee and his book into the bedroom he'd used to access the roof earlier. He stretched out on top of the covers fully dressed and read for another few minutes, then switched off the light and fell into a light sleep. He woke immediately when Coulson softly called his name from the doorway, sitting up and switching on the light.

"Your watch," Coulson said. "We should be secure here, but there's a Beretta and a shotgun on the table, just in case. Wake me if anything happens — and I do mean anything, Barton."

"I will boss," Clint said earnestly, catching Coulson's gaze and holding it until Coulson nodded "Sleep well."

Clint prowled around a little while Coulson went to the bathroom and made bathroom noises. When he heard the door open, Clint turned just in time to see Coulson, now wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, shut the door to the second bedroom behind himself. Clint settled himself back down on the sofa with his novel and a cup of coffee. Every half-hour or so he got up and walked as silently as he could around the dark house, stopping at each window to look out at the streets and yards, checking for anything out of place. Then he sat back down with his book. By the time he was six chapters in, he had a sneaking suspicion he'd already read this particular story about Juble Sackett. But if he had it was 15 years ago and he barely remembered it, so he didn't mind reading it again.

Just as it was starting to get light, Clint put on a fresh pot of coffee and investigated the contents of the fridge with intent. He came up with eggs, ham, onions and mushrooms. There was half a loaf of bread left from last night's sandwiches. He wondered how re-supply was supposed to work. They had enough fresh food for a couple more days, based on what he could see. He checked the cupboards and found them fully stocked with canned goods. They might be eating mostly canned beans if they were here for very long, but they wouldn't go hungry at least.

Clint found a frying pan and started to make breakfast as quietly as he could. He fried the ham in a little butter, then the eggs. While the eggs cooked he sliced the onions and mushrooms. He slid the ham and eggs onto plates and put them on the corner of the stove to

stay warm. He put the onions and mushrooms into the pan and checked the time. It was just going 7 a.m. He turned the heat under the pan down all the way, stepped over to Coulson's door, and knocked softly.

"Yes?"

"It's oh-seven-hundred, boss. Coffee's made and breakfast will be ready in five minutes."

"Thank you, Barton, I'll be right there."

Clint went back to the kitchen and put toast on while Coulson used the bathroom. He emerged immaculately dressed in a suit and tie, although his jacket was a little rumpled. Clint was about to make a joke about his boss' wardrobe, but he decided that he really didn't want Coulson to think he was an asshole. So instead he dished up the food and put the plates on the table.

"Thank you very much for making breakfast," Coulson said.

"No problem, seeing as how I was up anyway. I figured we should use up the stuff in the fridge first, in case we're stuck here for a while."

"Well, hopefully it won't be too long, but we have plenty of supplies," Coulson said after he finished chewing his mouthful.

"Yeah, I saw the canned stuff in the cupboards."

"There's also a couple of cases of MREs in the hall closet if it comes to that," Coulson said around a bite of ham and egg and toast crumbs. "Don't worry though, we won't be here very long without some sort of backup. I expect to hear from Headquarters today regarding the photos you took."

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Sure enough it was around noon when Coulson got the email he'd been waiting for. Clint was alternately lounging on the sofa reading his novel and regularly making a tour of all the windows, checking for any sign of suspicious activity nearby.

"Confirmation that we should go in for a closer look. Headquarters wants us to wait until tomorrow night, though. They're going to get us some better resolution satellite photos of the compound in the meantime, and also track the movements of the sentries to give us an idea of the guard patterns."

"How're they going to track the sentries?" Clint wanted to know.

"Infrared satellite imaging, like they use to track storm clouds, except on a smaller scale. They'll analyze the heat patterns and figure out where the bodies are. With any luck, we'll get
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a map of the sentry patrol patterns."

Clint was impressed that SHIELD was willing to use a spy satellite to figure out the guards' movement patterns, but he also detected a flaw in that plan. "Yeah, but that's only for one night, right? Tonight? They might use a different pattern tomorrow when we're there?"

"That's right. So we'll need to be very careful and ready for anything." One corner of Coulson's mouth quirked up a little bit, and Clint realized that Coulson had just smiled at him.

Coulson spent most of the rest of the day at his laptop, and Clint spent most of his reading. At 5 p.m., he got up and said, "I was thinking I could rustle up some dinner, if you like?"

"That would be very nice, Barton, thank you." Coulson gave him another small quirk of a smile.

"No problem."

Clint opened the fridge and started pulling things out and forming a plan. Half an hour later he called over his shoulder, "Dinner in ten minutes, boss."

"Thank you, Barton." Five minutes later Coulson snapped his laptop closed and moved it to the side of the table. He came into the kitchen and asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Um, you could put out the plates and stuff, I guess."

Coulson moved easily around him in the kitchen, gathering plates, cutlery, napkins, glasses, juice, and condiments.

Clint put a bowl of broccoli with cheese sauce on the table, along with a tray of seasoned sweet potato wedges. He slid two pepper steaks out onto the two plates, and then disappeared back into the kitchen with the pan. He came back in to find that Coulson had served out the vegetables for both of them.

"Thank you very much for cooking, Barton."

"Uh, sure. I mean there was all this stuff in the fridge, so I figured we should eat it."

Coulson had a bite of potato wedge in his mouth and was chewing while making appreciative noises. Clint tucked into his own food. A minute later, after Coulson had washed down a piece of steak with a swallow of juice, he said, "This is very good. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"Uh..." Clint felt the tops of his ears flushing and he looked down at his plate. "Just... you know... around."

Coulson didn't press him. "Well, it's excellent. Thank you," he said again. After dinner he insisted on doing the dishes.

Clint thought about settling back down with his novel, but instead he picked up a dishtowel and dried and put away the dishes while Coulson washed. Coulson had rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows to keep them dry, and Clint saw a small patch of ink high on Coulson's left forearm, just below his elbow. It took him a few minutes and a couple of very carefully discreet glances to see that it was the Army Ranger shoulder flash in black ink. He didn't ask about it.

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Once the dishes were done, Phil fired up his laptop again, and Barton went over to where he'd left his novel on the sofa. But Phil thought maybe he could provide a break in the tedium for the evening, so he took the disc he'd burned out of the computer's drive, and walked across the room to where Barton was just flipping his book open to the place he'd marked.

"Have you seen Enemy at the Gates?" Phil asked, waggling the disc.

"Um, no?"

"It's about a World War Two Russian sniper. I thought you might like it, so I downloaded it from the SHIELD library."

"Vasily Zaytsev?"

"Sorry?" Phil wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"The Russian sniper, is it Vasily Zaytsev?"

"Yes," Phil was surprised and a little impressed. "I don't think the film is historically accurate, though. It's a drama, not a documentary. So if you already know all about it..."

"No, no. I just... he's just the most famous World War Two Russian sniper, so I guessed it was about him. I'd... I'd like to see the movie, thanks. Thanks a lot." Barton looked surprised and even a little shy as Phil nodded and walked over to the DVD player to slide the disc into the machine. He also seemed surprised when Phil sat down on the other end of the sofa.

"Haven't you already seen it?"

"Yes, back when it originally came out. I was still a field agent then. I know a bit more about snipers now, so I'd like to watch it again. I won't mind if you want to pause now and then to add color commentary," Phil said, handing over the remote.

"Okay," Barton thumbed the remote. Since it was a library download there weren't a bunch of boring previews, just the standard FBI and Interpol warnings, then the menu.

Barton's mouth set in a hard line at the scene of Russian soldiers spilling off the back of a truck, and his eyebrows went up in disbelief at the words of the commanding officer:
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"The one with the rifle shoots.
The one without follows him.
When the one with the rifle gets killed,
The one who is following
picks up the rifle and shoots."

"Why didn't they give everyone a gun?" Barton asked, over the sounds of shells exploding on screen.

"They didn't have enough guns for everyone," Phil explained. "The factories could only churn out so many, and supplies—the materials they needed to manufacture more—were scarce all over. The Germans were cutting supply lines by bombing them whenever they could. In 1942 one-and-a-half million people starved to death during the siege of Leningrad." Phil spoke quietly, timing his phrases so that they fell between the on-screen dialog.

Barton was silent for a bit, then winced at the scene of the Russian officers firing on their own retreating troops.

"Did that really happen?" he asked, his eyes flicking sideways and then going back to the screen.

Phil nodded. "Most countries' armies have a death penalty for desertion in time of war. Technically, you can still be executed for deserting from the US Army in wartime, but the last time they actually killed anyone for deserting was 1945. They send you to Leavenworth for twenty years instead, these days."

"Jesus."

"Should I add 'World History' to that list of things you want to learn?" Phil was careful to keep his voice even and not sound like he was teasing or mocking in any way.

"Yeah. Good idea." Barton's eyes were riveted to the screen while Vasily Zaytsev shot at German officers from the cover of a disused fountain. He nodded in approval as the sniper timed his shots to coincide with exploding ordnance, and let out a quiet 'Yes' as Vasily took out the fifth German officer with his fifth bullet.

Barton was quiet for a while, intently watching the film, but then he asked, "Did the Russians have a shortage of men, too? Is that why there were women on the front lines?"

"No, the Russians were just more pragmatic about it than most other countries. They didn't see any good reason that women shouldn't fight if they wanted to, so they let them volunteer. The Russian Army, Navy, and Air Force all had female soldiers, sailors, engineers, pilots, and so on."

"Huh," was Barton's only reaction.

Phil noticed that Barton didn't flinch at any of the scenes of bombardment or the graphic shots of bullets ripping into flesh. He did, however stiffen up at a flashback of a young Vasily missing a shot. Phil felt bad, cataloguing Barton's reactions to the film this way, using them

to evaluate his mental state. But he'd be trusting Barton to have his back in the field tomorrow, on an op that had suddenly become a lot more dangerous than anyone expected.

They both sat quietly, absorbed in their own thoughts and reactions through most of the rest of the film. Barton sighed quietly during a scene between the young Sacha and the German sniper. Phil glanced over.

"He's dead." Barton said with a frown. Phil didn't confirm or deny, but noticed that Barton didn't flinch at all when Sacha's body was later revealed, hanging from a lamp-post.

Barton did swallow heavily during the scene where Vasily put the German sniper's gun into his friend Danilov's dead hands. That was when Phil decided that he could trust the man sitting next to him to watch his back.

The credits rolled and Phil yawned. "You okay to take first watch?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine. No problem."

"Thanks. Wake me at two, please," Phil said, and headed to the bathroom.

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Clint was very, very glad that Coulson didn't want to talk about the movie. He wanted to think about it. Maybe even see it again before his thoughts would be organized enough to share them with anyone. Especially his boss. Who seemed to be a good enough guy, but...

While Coulson used the bathroom, Clint headed for the kitchen to put a pot of coffee on.

The next morning Clint made breakfast again from the supplies in the fridge. They were almost out of bread, so Clint chopped up the rest of the sandwich meat and mixed it into scrambled eggs along with a hot pepper, some onion, and a couple of chopped tomatoes.

Coulson made no comment on the food until he'd finished eating at which point he said, "Thank you for cooking, Barton. That was excellent."

Coulson seemed to think it was only fair for him to do the dishes, so like the night before he rolled up his sleeves (he was still doing the full shirt-and-tie thing, and Clint wondered if Coulson had even brought casual clothes with him) and filled the sink with soapy water. Clint picked up a dishtowel and stood next to him.

"When my brother Barney and I joined the circus, I was too scrawny to help set up the tents and equipment and stuff, so they sent me to work in the kitchen tent." Clint spoke quietly, looking at the plates in his hands as he dried them. "I hated that I wasn't big enough to help with the real work, but I didn't mind working in the cook tent so much when Irina—she was the cook—when she realized how thin I was and started giving me extra 'tastes' of whatever she was making. She, um, explained stuff about what flavors went together and why she'd put
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the vegetables into the stew in a certain order so everything would come out cooked properly... Anyway, later I worked as a short order cook sometimes when I needed a job. So uh... I don't mind doing it while we're here."

"Thank you," Coulson said. Clint didn't know if he was being thanked for the story or for cooking, but he supposed it didn't matter.

Coulson was sitting down at the table with his laptop again and Clint looked over at where his novel (he'd finished Jubal Sackett and was on to The Tango Briefing) was open face down on the coffee table.

"There's a weight bench and a chin-up bar in the basement, if you're bored. We should get a recommendation from Headquarters this morning, though, so be ready to move out, just in case."

"Yeah, sure. Um, Coulson? Can I ask about something?"

"Of course."

"What do you mean by a 'recommendation from Headquarters'?"

"The Senior Agent in the field is always in charge of an operation, because he or she has more information, local knowledge, and often just a gut instinct for what's happening on the ground. Headquarters will make a recommendation based on all the information we've sent them, but ultimately the final decision on how to proceed will be up to me."

"Huh. Okay, well, I'll be downstairs if you need me." While Clint made full use of the weight bench and pull-up bar in the safe-house basement, he thought about what Coulson had just told him.

It meant that Coulson had a huge amount of responsibility, Clint realized. He had to decide if it was safe to go in and check out the damn nuclear torpedoes or whatever they were. Clint guessed that Coulson could refuse, and SHIELD would send in another team, but he didn't suppose you stayed a Senior Agent very long if you pulled that sort of thing. It made Coulson's meticulousness make sense, though, if the buck stopped with him. If he couldn't blame a mission gone wrong on orders from above. It made a lot of sense, Clint thought, giving the responsibility to the guy whose ass was actually on the line.

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Meanwhile, Phil was reading the emails he had been expecting. The experts at SHIELD were 70% sure that Barton's photos were of a nuclear torpedo from a Soviet submarine. How it had ended up in the possession of a drug lord in Mexico was a matter for another team entirely, but for now, Phil's job was to confirm that that's what it was. Which meant him and Barton sneaking into the compound to get a much closer look.
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Phil was glad Barton was down in the basement as he got out of his chair and stretched his back, and then paced back and forth across the ground floor of the safe-house a couple of times. It wouldn't do to look nervous or uncertain in front of a brand new agent. And that was what had Coulson a little nervous and uncertain. He wasn't entirely sure Barton was up to the task. He trusted Barton's aim, sure, but the junior agent had never been on this kind of operation before. Phil had no idea how Barton would react to orders in the field, under pressure.

'If he wasn't capable, he would have never passed his training missions. If I didn't think he was capable, I shouldn't have brought him out here in the first place, even though it was supposed to be a cakewalk of a mission. Hell, if I didn't think he was capable, then I had no business asking to be his handler in the first place,' Phil told himself.

Phil knew Barton was capable. That wasn't what was worrying him. What was worrying him, he thought as he sat back down and got to work on drafting personnel and equipment requests, was that he was about to go into hostile territory with a man he didn't really know, and didn't yet trust.

Phil knew he had options. He could tell Headquarters that Barton wasn't suitable for the new mission parameters, and he could wait until a more experienced agent was sent out. But if he did that, he knew his relationship with Barton would be irreparably damaged, not to mention the blow it would be to Barton's self-confidence. 'His self-confidence shouldn't be an issue if the mission's at stake,' Phil thought. But it wasn't about the mission. He was sure Barton could do the mission.

Phil thought back to Barton sitting on the sofa next to him the previous evening, watching Enemy at the Gates. 'He'll have my back. I don't know how he'll react under pressure, or whether he'll follow orders if all hell breaks loose, but he'll have my back. That's enough. For now, anyway.'

When Barton came up from the basement half an hour later, covered in a thin sheen of sweat, Phil sent him to shower. "And once you're done, I'll brief you on what we're going to be doing tonight."

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Clint was impressed. It took a lot to impress him, and he was fucking impressed. Coulson might look like an accountant, but dressed in a field suit and creeping through a drug lord's store room at two in the morning, the man did actually move like a goddamn ninja. Clint was good at moving quietly, really good, but as they had crept into the building, Clint had realized that he wasn't even in Coulson's league.

They were crouched by the back wall, over the metal tube with Russian writing on it. Coulson had a tiny re-lensed flashlight and was carefully searching the tube and taking
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photos of every marking he found. For the first thirty seconds, Clint watched him, then he scanned the interior of the building instead, alert for anything.

Which was how he spotted the end of what looked like a second metal tube, poking out from under a tarp, just to his left. He didn't move for a second. He stared at the thing, then turned his eyes back to the one Coulson was examining. They looked the same. He put a hand on Coulson's arm. Coulson shook him off and shot him an annoyed look. Clint got a little pissed. 'How else was I supposed to get your attention?' he wondered as he gave the hand signal for 'look' pointing at his own eyes, and then pointed at the tarp, and what was under it.

He carefully didn't smile when Coulson silently but clearly mouthed 'fuck'. Coulson leaned in close and put his lips next to Clint's ear. Clint held up his hand signaling 'wait' and turned his hearing aid up to maximum. Then he nodded.

"Uncover that one, and look for more," Coulson whispered.

Clint nodded again, then moved silently over to the tarp. Sure enough, the second metal tube looked pretty much exactly like the first. Clint found a third one behind it. He uncovered that one, then searched the rest of the corner of the building without finding anything else. He sat back on his heels, keeping a look-out, while Coulson moved over to take more pictures.

He felt a light touch on his knee and leaned in so that Coulson could speak into his ear. "Try to lift one end of this one. Slowly. Carefully."

Clint nodded. Coulson had explained on their way out to the site that the tubes might not still contain actual nuclear material, that the inner workings may have been removed recently, or years ago. Since the safe-house hadn't come equipped with a geiger counter, one way to tell would be by the weight of the tubes: a real missile would weigh upwards of 600 pounds. Clint got into position at the tail end of the torpedo in a wide stance and a weightlifter's crouch. He used the fins for handholds, tested his grip then nodded 'ready' to Coulson. Coulson held up a hand, and sat motionless, listening for a few seconds, before signalling 'up'. Clint tried to ease the end of the tube up. It barely budged. He strained harder and lifted it two inches above the ground, muscles bulging. Coulson nodded and motioned, 'down slow'.

Clint eased the torpedo back to the dirt floor as gently as he could. It was very unlikely to be unstable, but Clint figured it couldn't hurt to be extra careful.

Coulson regarded the thing for a minute, then motioned Clint to cover the three tubes up, leaving them exactly as they had found them. Then he gave the signal to move out. They crept back out of the compound, keeping to the shadows even in the dark of a moonless night and avoiding the sentries. They stopped, silent and still every time Coulson heard a noise. Once they were half-a-mile away, they broke into an easy jog back to where they'd parked the battered jeep that had been in the safe-house garage.

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Phil spent the next two days working very, very hard. He'd unexpectedly landed himself a major operation; an operation that needed a large number of personnel and specialized equipment to be clandestinely transported into the country. The plan was to sneak into the compound with enough personnel to carry the tubes out. Which meant three four-man teams, plus at least one nuclear expert, and someone from explosives/bomb disposal, as well as personnel to cover their exit and engage the drug lord's caballeros if they didn't manage to get out undetected. Which meant also having a couple of medics, and transport...

Phil did the math in his head and figured they'd need at least three Quinjets for the exfil, and that assumed that their nuclear expert confirmed that the torpedoes weren't 'hot' and could be safely transported out by a jet that also contained people.

Emails flew back and forth. Jasper Sitwell was handling logistics in New York, tasked with getting all the necessary personnel briefed and in-country. They decided to keep the film crew cover that Barton had started the operation with; it was an easy way to get a bunch of big guys with vaguely sinister black uniforms and equipment over the border without causing any fuss. They could have done a clandestine crossing, or an airdrop of course, but this was easier. They already had a bunch of promotional material for "Revenge of the Mutants" printed up, and it meant they could rent a bus or two and openly move the entire team to within striking distance of the target. Which, as Phil knew from experience, was much easier than moving two dozen or so people plus equipment completely clandestinely.

Phil sighed and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"Can I get you another cup of coffee, boss?" Barton asked, glancing up from his novel. Phil absently noted the cover and realized that Barton was on his third book. He felt a wave of gratitude that his new asset was happy to sit and read quietly for hours, and not pester him with questions about the operation. The fact that Barton made good coffee and was an excellent cook was icing on the proverbial cake. Phil knew how lucky he was. Usually having to do such demanding work under sub-optimal conditions with someone he barely knew in the room would have ratcheted his stress levels up considerably, but Barton had the ability to fade into the background when he wanted to. 'Useful skill for a sniper,' thought Phil.

"Yes please, Barton, I'd appreciate that."

When Barton put the cup of hot, black coffee down by his elbow, Phil gave him a warm, genuine smile of gratitude.

"Sit down here for a minute, would you? There are some things I'd like to go over with you."

Barton took a chair opposite him and wrapped his hands around his own mug.

"From the pictures we got two nights ago and the weight of the tube you tried to lift, the experts at SHIELD are 95% confident that they are exactly what they look like: old Soviet-era nuclear missiles, the kind that were designed to be launched by a submarine."

"Like in Crimson Tide?" Clint asked, not entirely serious.

"Yes, just like in Crimson Tide. Or maybe more accurately The Hunt for Red October."

"I haven't seen that one."

"I'll download it for you to watch tonight if you'd like. Anyway, we won't know for sure until we get in there with the appropriate equipment, so we are proceeding on the assumption that the operation is to retrieve three nuclear missiles. The tech guys are 99% sure that they are stable, and that it would be impossible to set them off accidentally; however it's possible that the casing around the nuclear material is old and corroded. If something goes wrong, we won't have a nuclear explosion on our hands, but we might have a radiation leak, and we're going to avoid that if at all possible. Which means getting the missiles out of there without a firefight erupting." Phil stopped, wanting to know what issue Barton would pick up on first.

"But it's gonna take at least four guys to carry each one of those tubes!"

"Yes." Phil nodded. "Which means we need to infiltrate a team of minimum 16, probably closer to 20 people, and try to get the tubes clear of the compound at least, before the shooting starts. We'll be taking the sentries out this time, rather than going around them," he said evenly. Phil didn't like killing people out of simple expediency, but it this case it was necessary.

Barton nodded his understanding.

Next, Phil asked: "Are you comfortable using the Blaser with a suppressor?"

"Sure. It'll still make a noise, though. And if anyone sees or hears a body go down-"

"Yes, I know. I've been trying to decide whether it's best to take the sentries down from close quarters instead." Phil rubbed a hand across his forehead again, then wished he hadn't made his tiredness quite so obvious to Barton. He picked up his coffee and took another sip.

"Knife in the back, you mean, or a garrote or something like that?"

"Something like that," Phil nodded. "There are a couple of non-lethal options that I've had to discard because they're just not certain enough for an operation this delicate."

"The guys are hired guns for a drug lord, they probably deserve it, somehow." Barton shrugged philosophically.

"True. The difficulty with this particular operation is that we need enough manpower to get out safely if things go badly, but we want to go in with the smallest number of people possible to minimize the risk of it going badly."

"Yeah, I can see that." Barton drank some more of his coffee, but didn't say anything else, so Phil continued.

"Going in is fine, with the dozen people who are going to be carrying the tubes out, I'm confident we can hold our ground if need be. It's heading back out, with those dozen people carrying the tubes that I'm concerned about. They'll have sidearms, of course, but we'll need solid cover. That's where you come in." Phil sat back in his chair and looked at Barton. "I'm figuring you, Diaz, and Park for primary cover. Opinions?"

Barton looked surprised and more than a little confused, but Phil waited. He wanted Barton's honest opinion, and hoped he would give it.

"I don't know Park. I've never worked with him... her?"

"Him. Hansin Park, he defected from the North Korean army with some very useful intel. He didn't... fit in with the other acronym agencies, so SHIELD recruited him. Good with guns, knives, and hand-to-hand."

"I'm... uh, I'm pretty good with knives, too, um, in case that wasn't in my file somewhere. Uh, throwing them, I mean."

Phil nodded thoughtfully, but didn't say anything, and waited for Barton to go on.

"Diaz is good. I've been on a couple of ops with her. She's smart and keeps her head under fire."

"Yes, I agree with that assessment. Park is just as good, more experienced, more versatile. Very deadly. Quiet, keeps to himself. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I don't believe in that 'team player' nonsense. Where would you take position?" Phil leaned forward and pulled the satellite map that had been couriered to the safe-house yesterday clear of the other paperwork.

Barton sat forward and stared at the map for a minute. Then he fixed his eyes on a point over Phil's left shoulder, seemingly trying to remember something.

"The rocks that I took the pictures from are the only cover for miles around, but they're too far away from the compound. The guys carrying the missiles will be out in the open for too long, and we'd have to shoot through them to pick off the bad guys. It's not ideal, but we'll have to go right up to the wall with the team going in, and wait until they come back out so we can cover their exit."

Phil nodded.

"What about mobile cover?"

"Huh?"

"Mobile cover. You used it during training."

"Oh, that weird aluminum-and-kevlar shield thing? Yeah, I guess that could work. We'd need, like, one each, but I guess if you're bringing in that many people and a bunch of equipment and stuff... I prefer to be up high somewhere, but that's obviously not an option here, so, yeah. Okay."

Phil nodded, and continued to explain his plans. Barton asked questions when he didn't understand something, and, eventually, started mentioning when he thought he saw a hole or a flaw in Phil's plan or tactics. Inevitably, it was something Phil had already thought of, and had an answer ready. But he was very impressed with Barton's tactical awareness and attention to detail.

"It still comes down to how long sixteen people can keep perfectly silent while carrying three 600-pound nuclear missiles out of a tin shed." Phil managed to stop himself from sighing and rubbing his hand over his eyes yet again.

"Well, it sounds easy when you put it like that," Barton said with a smirk, but Phil just shook his head.

"I did seriously consider doing it the other way: going in with a full force, subduing everyone in the compound first, and then dealing with the torpedoes. But it's a lot more risky, not only in terms of danger to our agents and loss of life for the bad guys. You saw women in the compound, so we have to assume there could be children as well. Plus we're not exactly here with the permission of the Mexican government, so it's better to keep things as quiet as possible. There's a chance, a small one admittedly, that we'll manage to make it out without waking anybody up."

They talked about the op for another hour, and then Barton looked at the clock on the wall over Phil's shoulder and said, "Um, I should be getting some sleep if you want me to take second watch again."

"Oh, sorry." Phil said, kicking himself for something, no matter how trivial, having slipped his mind. "I should have mentioned. We've got backup outside now, so we don't need to keep watch. We both get a full eight hours sleep tonight and tomorrow, which we'll need before heading out on an overnight op. I'll download that movie for you if you like?"

"Sure, thanks."

Five minutes later Phil handed Barton a disc and he popped it into the player.

"Are you sure the noise won't bother you?" Barton asked, pointing the remote at the TV while Phil headed back to his seat at the table in front of his laptop.

"No, it's fine. I'll be going to bed soon anyway."

Sure enough, half an hour into the film, Phil waved at Barton on his way to the bathroom. Five minutes later shut his bedroom door behind himself before stripping out of his clothes and pulling on sweatpants and a t-shirt to sleep in.

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Forty-eight hours later, Clint was again crouching in a corner of the building containing the nuclear missiles. Partly to be out of the way of twelve guys trying to silently load three 600-pound missiles into special slings, and partly so that he could look through a crack and keep an eye on what was going on outside. Park was out there, doing an excellent impersonation of a statue, and Diaz was just inside the door. Coulson had abandoned the idea of the 'mobile cover' and instead decided that having a sharpshooter assigned to cover each team carrying a
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torpedo made more sense. Park would be going out with the first missile, Diaz was second, and Clint was last, so he was staying out of the way for now.

His eyes flicked from the crack, to the team maneuvering the missiles, to Coulson, who was standing just as still as Park, off to one side, watching everything. Coulson looked like a tightly wound spring, waiting to move into action. The first team finished loading. Coulson moved, silently, like a cat (one of the big deadly ones, a panther or a cougar) and touched the nuclear expert on the shoulder. The man jumped and Clint saw Coulson's hand come up, ready to clamp it over the guy's mouth if he forgot himself and spoke out loud. He didn't. He looked almost too scared to move and then visibly relieved when Coulson leaned in and, Clint assumed, whispered to him to pack up his gear and move out with the first missile.

Clint saw Diaz poke her head out the door and signal Park. He put his eye to the crack again and scanned the compound while the first team moved slowly out of the building. Park was to the left of the four men shuffling (almost) silently along with 600 pounds of nuclear missile in a sling between them, the nuclear expert following behind. Clint watched until they made it to the compound's back gate, which was no longer guarded by a pair of the drug lord's thugs. Then he turned his attention back to the interior of the building. The second team was loaded and ready to go. Clint detached himself from the wall. He figured he'd take Diaz's position as soon as she was out with her team.

Coulson was holding a whispered conversation with the explosives expert. Clint had been introduced to him earlier that day: Tyrone 'call me Ty' Booker. He'd seemed very easygoing at the time, all smiles as if this mission was the most fun he'd had all year. But now he seemed to be arguing with Coulson, or at least disagreeing with him. Coulson was frowning, and Clint concentrated, try to read his lips. It was dark, and he didn't know Coulson well enough yet to be very accurate, so he couldn't pick up very much, but Coulson seemed to be insisting that Booker go out with the next group. Booker finally shrugged, and turned and nodded to Diaz, who was waiting to signal the group carrying the second missile. Diaz scanned the compound from the door one last time, then gave the hand signal for 'move out'.

Clint moved cautiously around the men who were loading the last missile, making sure not to get in anyone's way. He didn't often feel intimidated by guys who were bigger than him, but Coulson seemed to have selected the personnel for this operation based on height and weight. The agents loading and carrying the missiles wouldn't look out of place in the defensive line of an NFL football team. Clint figured it made sense, since their main task was to carry 600 pounds of radioactive explosive across almost a mile of desert, but it did mean he was feeling a little... small.

Clint saw Coulson signaling out of the corner of his eye and looked over. Sure enough, Coulson wanted him to check if the coast was clear for them to move out. Clint poked his head out the door, waited for his eyes to adjust to the slightly brighter light and then carefully quartered the area. He didn't see anything that shouldn't be there, anything that wasn't there last time he checked. He turned back to Coulson and nodded, signaling 'all clear'. Coulson signalled 'move out' and took point. The linebackers heaved the missile off the ground and shuffled, quietly, out the door. Clint followed, his rifle at the ready.

They were 500 yards away from the compound when they heard a noise from the group ahead of them: a muffled curse, then a loud, metallic sound in the still of the night. Clint tried to see what was happening ahead, and then turned his head to try to catch any noises from the compound behind him. Sure enough, he heard a shout and the banging of doors and boots. Then came the first couple of shots. Clint spun around, dropped to one knee, and raised his rifle, all without conscious thought. He regulated his breathing and waited, watching for muzzle flash.

When he saw it, he fired back so quickly that the report of his own gun overlapped the sound of the shot from the compound. He thought he heard a cry, but with the noise that had erupted behind him and the fact that Coulson was now issuing orders over the comms in his ear, he couldn't be sure.

"Park, take the right flank, Diaz, on the left. I want the jets in here now. Home in on my signal and put them down between me and the compound. Hernandez, what happened up there?"

"Ran into a cactus and dropped the missile on a rock, sir."

"Booker and Maynard, get in there and assess the structural integrity of the missile. Any injuries?"

Clint ignored the answer to Coulson's question because more fire was coming from the compound. There were at least two automatic rifles, probably AK-47s, but Clint ignored those. They didn't have the range to be a problem, and since it probably meant the guys firing them didn't know exactly where they were, Clint relaxed a little. He listened and watched for rifle fire.

Some goatherd with a .22 was much more dangerous to them right now than the idiots making all the noise with the AKs. Sure enough, he spotted rifle muzzle flash from the edge of the compound, and returned fire. Diaz plunked down in the sand near to him and started to pick off the guys firing the AKs. Clint concentrated on looking for the smaller flashes of the rifles. There was a noise overhead and Clint heard the Quinjet pilots on the comms. The next thing he saw was a very bright flash and a distinctive 'whump' sound.

"RPG," he yelled, not remembering or caring about radio protocol. "They've got RPGs and they're firing at the Quinjets!"

Clint heard Coulson ordering the Quinjets pull up and land out of RPG range, which of course meant they wouldn't have the jets as cover. Clint heard a rifle crack from his left. There was a loud 'clank' from the compound as one of the men wielding the RPGs presumably went down and he heard Park make a small, satisfied-sounding grunt. More rifles opened up, and Clint tried to get a bead on them. He heard a yell behind him, almost lost in the noise of the Quinjets landing.

"Everyone fall back to the jets. Now."

Diaz was up and running, and Park was moving too. Clint didn't like turning his back on bad guys with rifles, but he took one more shot then retreated with the others. He tried to check

behind him as he ran while also avoiding an unpleasant encounter with a cactus. He'd taken a few dozen steps towards the jets, which were spilling pale blue light onto the desert sand as the missiles were being loaded, when he heard a rifle crack and one of the guys carrying a missile in front of him howled and stumbled. Clint loosed three shots on the run, just to make the shooter keep his head down for a minute. Park was turning around and heading back, but Coulson waved him off.

"No, go cover the teams loading then get on board!"

Coulson was angling toward Team Three and the man who was stumbling, and Clint got there about the same time.

"I'm hit. Leg," the guy on the back left corner of the sling said apologetically.

"I got it, boss," Clint said, shouldering his rifle and taking the handle of the sling. The firing started up again behind them, and they moved as quickly as they could to the bay door of the nearest Quinjet. Clint glanced behind himself as they paused at the bay doors and saw Coulson, sidearm in hand, scanning the desert, seemingly oblivious to the gunfire chattering from the compound. As they loaded the last missile, Coulson was on the comms.

"Team One Leader, report; is everyone accounted for?"

"Yes, sir. The package is secure and Maynard and Park are with us."

"Pilot QuinJet One, you're cleared to take off at your discretion."

There was a roar and a wash of sand as the first jet took off. Coulson was talking to Team Two as Clint heaved his corner of the missile onto the jet and helped strap it down. Clint heard confirmation that Diaz and Booker were on the second jet, and Coulson's okay for it to take off.

"Everyone accounted for?" Coulson asked as his eyes scanned the men crowded into the jet's cargo hold.

"Yes, sir," answered one of the linebackers.

"Pilot, Jet Three you are cleared to take off at your discretion."

"About fucking time!" came the answer from the cockpit and Clint grinned. He grabbed a handhold as the jet gave a jolt.

"Medic!" called Coulson. A woman in fatigues, carrying a large pack emblazoned with a red cross, knelt down next to the agent who'd taken a bullet and attacked his pants with a pair of bandage scissors.

The rest of the team began making the kinds of jokes that got made after you've spent four hours under radio silence and then been shot at. McCoy, the agent who'd taken a bullet, was being told how lucky he was that the sniper had aimed low and hit him in the calf, when someone looked up at Clint and said, "Hey, Barton, you're bleeding all over our nice clean floor!"

"It's just a scratch," Clint threw back. "It can wait until Florence Nightingale is finished making sure that McCoy will still be able to play the trombone."

But the next thing Clint knew, Coulson was standing next to him and pressing a folded handkerchief (what the fuck, an actual cotton handkerchief?) to the graze on his bicep. Clint felt weird about it, like he didn't deserve the attention, but he didn't pull away.

"It's nothing, boss, just got nicked by a chip of rock or something."

Coulson inspected the handkerchief and then pressed it back to the wound.

"Parker, when you're done with McCoy's leg, Barton could use a couple of butterfly closures on his arm." Coulson said to the medic, then quietly, so that only Clint could hear, "Good work, Barton."

Clint felt a warmth bloom in his gut. He stamped down on it immediately. He didn't need Coulson's approval. He didn't need the swell of pride that came from being told he'd done a good job by a man that he was starting to respect... and like.

But he didn't shrug off the press of Coulson's handkerchief from his arm, either.

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Barton was in Phil's office, one hip propped on the corner of his desk, as Phil went through the corrections and additions to his mission report for the Mexico operation. They could have done this by email, of course, but Phil had wanted to somehow acknowledge Barton's work both during the mission and in compiling what was in fact a very good report, the minor corrections they were now making notwithstanding.

He was just working out how to phrase his praise when Barton said, "So, uh, Coulson, would you, uh, be interested in having a cup of coffee with me sometime?"

Phil was blindsided enough by the unexpected question that it took him a second before he asked for clarification. "Are you asking me to socialize with you outside the office, or are you asking me out on a date?"

"Um, whichever you'll say yes to, but I was hoping for a date."

"I'm very flattered, Barton," Phil said trying to put every ounce of sincerity he could into his voice, "but I'm afraid it's out of the question."

"There's no rule against it, I checked!" Barton sounded like a petulant teenager.

"No, there's no regulation, but it's a personal principle of mine. I don't date my co-workers," Phil said, lying to Clint Barton for the very first time, and fervently hoping it would be the last.
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"Yeah, whatever." Barton unstuck his hip from the corner of Phil's desk and moved towards the door.

"Barton," Phil put just enough command into his voice to make Barton stop and turn halfway. He picked a folder up off his desk and held it out. "You're booked for paratrooper training starting the day after tomorrow. All the details are in here." Phil waited, but Barton didn't move to take the folder from him.

"Paratrooper training?" Barton's eyebrows had disappeared up into his hairline. "As in jumping out of an airplane?"

"With a parachute, yes. It's a two-week course. The first week is practice, learning how to pack a chute, how to leave the plane, how to land without breaking anything. The second you'll spend jumping at various altitudes, day and night, and learn how to handle cargo chutes and do a water landing." Phil realized that he was trying to sell the idea, make it sound exciting, or at least fun.

Barton stared at him for a moment more, then stepped forward and took the folder out of his hand. "You're sending me to learn how to jump out of airplanes. With a parachute."

"Is that a problem, Barton?"

"No, boss, no problem at all." The incredulous look on Barton's face slowly turned into a smile. "Guess I'd better go start packing, then, huh?" Barton waved at him with the folder, and sauntered out of Phil's office.

'That could have gone better,' Phil thought, realizing that he had no idea whatsoever what Barton's reaction meant.

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Nine days later, Clint and the rest of his training group spilled through the door of their bunkhouse. They'd just finished the first week of jump school and had gone out to celebrate. Clint had even had a couple of beers. But only a couple, because there was no way he wanted to be hungover the first time he actually jumped for real.

The rest of the group had been similarly restrained, even the guys who were doing the course as a refresher, and were jumping for the 50th time, rather than the first, tomorrow. Clint was excited about tomorrow's jump. He couldn't wait to find out what it felt like to be free falling through the air. The whole week had been great; their instructor was a good guy, hard but fair, and most of the rest of the group were okay, too. He honestly couldn't remember last time he'd had this much fun.

"Hey, Barton, you coming? We're gonna play a Grand Theft Auto tournament," called one of his classmates.
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"Nah, go ahead. I'm gonna check in with my boss."

Video games weren't really Clint's thing. He didn't see the point in pretending to shoot things when he could just, you know, go out and shoot things for real if he wanted to. He'd see if anyone wanted to give the air hockey table a go, later. For now, he folded himself into the chair in front of the shared computer in the corner of the rec room, signed in, and opened his email.

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To: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
From: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
Subject: Jump school
Attachment: tower_jump.vid

Hi boss,

Things are going good here at jump school. I had a bit of a hard
time at first getting used to the weird fall on your ass landing
they taught us, but I got the hang of it after a bit. We finished
Week 1 today and so we do our first real jump tomorrow. Should be
fun. The instructor here is a good guy. He let me play around a
bit on the tower after we finished practicing yesterday. Someone
took a video, if I can get this to work right its' attached.

Clint Barton
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Phil opened his email the next morning, read the message, and clicked on the attachment Barton had sent him. The grainy, shaky phone footage nonetheless clearly showed one Clint Barton in bare feet, fatigue pants, and a tight black t-shirt, doing a two-and-a-half revolution somersault in the pike position worthy of an Olympic diver off the 30-foot jump practice tower. He landed in the sandpit with a shock-absorbing deep knee bend, then stood tall, arms spread, and did a showman's bow, to the applause and whistles of his fellow trainees. Phil saved the video file to a folder labeled "Barton - Personal" on his hard drive.

Eight days later, Barton sauntered into his office looking happier, more relaxed, and more confident than Phil had ever seen him. Phil kept his pleased smile to himself. He had been hoping that a training course that not only pushed Barton's physical limits, but also allowed him to excel among his peers, would have precisely that effect.

"Hey, boss. Just wanted to let you know that I'm back." Barton's trademark cocky grin was firmly in place.

"Thank you, Barton. Did you enjoy your training course?"
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"Yeah! It was... uh, pretty cool." Phil could see Barton clamping down on his enthusiasm out of long habit. "It's a good thing you made me do those swimming lessons, though. The water landing in full gear would have been kinda freaky if I hadn't practiced swimming in my clothes."

"Good. You'll need to re-certify every twelve months, unless we happen to have a mission that includes a jump in the meantime."

"Yeah, they explained that to us on the last day of training. It's like the CPR course, we need to re-cert every year."

Phil nodded. "I'll keep track of your training schedule for you, but feel free to remind me if I forget to schedule your refresher when it comes due."

"Sure. Uh, boss?"

"Yes?" Barton looked unusually hesitant all of a sudden, and Phil noticed how tightly his left fist was clasped as Barton held it out to him.

"They, uh... on the last day they gave me... us, I mean, everyone who was doing the course for the first time got one. What... Is there something I'm supposed to do with it?" Barton unclasped his fist to reveal a small gold paratrooper's jump pin.

Phil could see the swell of remembered pride in Barton's face. "You can wear it on your dress uniform if you want to. You're not required to, SHIELD leaves the wearing of decorations up to the individual. If you do choose to wear it, over the left breast pocket is traditional."

"Do you wear yours?" Barton asked. "Uh... I mean, I assume you have one."

"Yes, Barton, I have one. And yes, I wear it on the rare occasion that I'm in dress uniform."

Barton nodded, as if that had decided him. He closed his fist back around the gold pin.

"Right, well, I guess I'll head over to the range. I've got two weeks worth of practicing to catch up on."

Phil watched him head out, a spring in his step and his head held high. Not that Barton had ever seemed to lack confidence, but Phil was becoming more and more sure that the cocky self-assurance Barton usually displayed was a front. But not this - this was real pride. Phil thought back over Barton's file, which he had practically memorized. There were no Boy Scout merit badges in his childhood. No triumphs at Little League games. Probably no gold stars for school work either, what with his erratic attendance records. And the one skill he did have, the one thing he had trained hard to earn, the one thing he had that he could be proud of... had been given to him by a man who had then turned around and betrayed him. Who had left him to die in an alley.

'I'm going to do what I can to change that,' Phil thought, remembering the downcast eyes and sudden tension when Phil had asked Barton where he had learned to cook so well. 'I'm going to do my damnedest to help him accomplish things he can be proud of. Starting with...' Phil

jostled his computer mouse to bring the screen to life and looked up the GED requirements for a High School equivalency certificate. He copied the list to a file in his 'Barton - Personal' folder and began researching looking up educational software. 'World History first,' Phil thought, 'because we talked about it during the mission. Then...' Phil cross-referenced the list Barton had sent him of things he wanted to learn and started to build a plan around it.

Chapter 2: The Second Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The Second Year

Clint was in his quarters working on his laptop when it dinged at him and a little red exclamation mark appeared on the icon for his email. He clicked it and read the flagged message:

`All personnel currently at NYC headquarters who are certified on precision rifles with marksmanship scores of 750 or higher please report immediately to the armory. SHIELD assistance has been requested by NYPD and the Mayor's Office to respond to a serious, immediate threat to civilian life in the Manhattan area.`

Clint shoved his feet into his boots and didn't bother tying them or shutting down the computer. He left his quarters at a fast jog. As he turned into the main corridor that led to the armory, he was joined by Evans and Diaz.

"You know anything about this?" Evans asked as they jogged down the hallway.

"Just what the email said," Diaz said. "I guess they need us to shoot something."

Clint just shook his head.

They headed into the armory and joined a group assembling in front of Director Fury. Clint saw Coulson standing to Fury's left, with Sitwell and Hill and a couple of other people he recognized as senior agents.

"Thank you for arriving so quickly," Fury said to the group. "Approximately thirty minutes ago a number of… creatures emerged from the sewers in parts of Manhattan. They began to attack, apparently at random, people on the streets. The NYPD has responded, but are finding the situation beyond the scope of their capabilities. The creatures seem to be impossible to subdue and extremely difficult to kill." Fury clicked a button on a remote in his hand. Behind him a video projection appeared on the wall.

Clint watched as a… thing that looked like a cross between an alligator and an angry bear reared up and smashed a clawed… paw? through the window of a car, reaching for the occupants. A police officer fired eight rounds into the creature's head and chest, but the creature didn't even seem to notice. The officer was fumbling for another clip when the thing turned on him and tore his head off. Clint saw Diaz wince beside him, and Evans put a hand to his mouth as the creature opened his jaws and dropped the officer's head to the pavement with a dull thud, then turned back to the car.

"This is what we're up against, people. There have been reports of these creatures in Midtown north of Times Square, Hell's Kitchen, and Chelsea. The only way the police have found to stop them so far is to put enough bullets into one that it bleeds out. Shotgun pellets

don't seem to have any effect. They are loath to use large-caliber automatic weapons with so many civilians in close proximity. Your job is to put these things down before more people die. The senior agents here will brief their teams further as and when we get more intel. As soon as you have your team assignment, get your weapons and move out." Fury nodded at the senior agents standing next to him.

"Barton, Diaz, Evans, with me," Coulson called. Barton followed Coulson toward the locker rooms. Behind him, Hill was calling her team to order.

"Speed is of the essence, people. You'll be up high so you don't need full tactical gear, just vests and comms - make sure you're going to be comfortable," Coulson's voice was clipped as he opened his own locker and swapped his suit jacket for a bulletproof vest and SHIELD windbreaker.

Clint slipped his hearing aid out and replaced it with his comm unit before throwing his tac vest on over the t-shirt he was wearing. He looked up to see if he had time to lace his boots properly, but the others seemed ready to go, so he hoped he could do it on the way.

Two minutes later they were on the roof climbing into a chopper, and six minutes after that they were climbing back out again on the top level of a parking structure on the north side of 48th, a half-block east of Broadway. Clint had had time to tie his boots properly during the flight, just.

They fanned out on the roof without being told, and Clint immediately started to assess his angles and look for his targets. One of the alligator-things in the street below him was climbing over an SUV to get to a city bus that had people in it.

"Permission to engage, sir?" Diaz's voice came crisply over the comms.

"Engage at your discretion, all of you."

Clint lined up his target, settled his breathing, and pulled the trigger. The creature didn't drop. It didn't even pause in trying to reach through the broken window of the bus towards the screaming passengers. Luckily its arms weren't long enough, but it started tearing at the metal side of the bus instead.

'I hit it. I know I did. I didn't miss. I never miss.' Clint ejected the spent cartridge, settled his breathing again, and fired once more, dead on the back of the thing's head at the base of the skull. This time he saw a flash of white.

"Fuck," he said quietly, but not so quietly that Coulson didn't hear him over the comms. To his left he heard Diaz fire. He glanced over quickly; the creature she was shooting at hadn't gone down either.

"What's the matter, Barton?" Coulson asked, coming up to stand beside him.

"Just a sec, boss." Clint sighted his target again, this time aiming carefully for the same spot he had already hit twice. He let out a long slow breath and squeezed the trigger. This time, the creature dropped like a stone.

“Well done.” Coulson was peering through a spotting scope.

“It shouldn’t have taken me three shots to put that thing down,” Clint said. He had a theory, though. To his left he could hear Diaz firing again; then her soft swearing in Spanish came through the comms. Behind him, Evans was shooting repeatedly, and Clint hoped that he had a good line on his target.

“These things don’t go down, sir.” Evans’ somewhat breathless voice came over the comms. “I’ve put a dozen bullets into this one’s head and it’s like I’m shooting spitballs at it!”

“I’m having the same problem, sir,” said Diaz. She fired again. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, finally! It took me eight shots to put one down, sir.”

Clint was lining up another target. He wanted to test his theory, so he tried to block out the distraction of the voices on the comms and focus. He fired once, then again.

“How were you able to put one down with three shots, Barton?”

“Just a sec, boss, please?” Clint needed to concentrate, and he hoped Coulson would understand and give him a minute to figure this out properly. He settled his breathing, aimed, and fired for the third time. The creature dropped. He shouldered his rifle and turned. Coulson waved Diaz and Evans over into a huddle.

“Okay, here’s the thing,” Clint said. “They’re like alligators, right? So basically lizards. Mutant lizards or whatever, but still, reptile brain. So their brain, it’s tiny, and right at the top of the spine, where the apricot is in a person.”

“Apricot?” asked Coulson.

“The medulla oblongata,” explained Diaz. “The part of the brain that controls involuntary movement. It’s where you aim if your target has a hostage, because if you hit it, they can’t pull the trigger as they’re falling.”

“Right, and that’s all the brain these things have.” Clint said. “The problem is that it’s about the size of a walnut and protected by a big thick plaque of bone.” Clint gestured at the back of his own head with his free hand.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Evans asked.

“Because after my first shot split open its skin, I could see the skull bone chipping on my second shot, which weakened it enough for the third shot to punch through.”

“Are you telling me that you’re taking them down by putting three shots in exactly the same place?” Coulson sounded incredulous, which was a first.

“Well, yeah.”

“Well, yeah,” Evans repeated sarcastically. “That’s great for Hawkeye here, but what the hell are the rest of us supposed to do?”

“Just keep shooting at the same spot until it goes down, I guess,” said Diaz with a shrug.

Coulson raised his hand to his ear and touched his comms unit. *“Team One Leader to Base, request immediate supply of 7.62 caliber armor-piercing ammunition to all teams engaged in the current operation on my authorization, Agent Phil Coulson, Level 5.”*

“Armor-piercing ammo. That’s brilliant, boss,” Clint said, grinning at Coulson, who held up his hand for silence.

“Acknowledged,” Coulson said into his comms. *“Please patch Agent Barton’s comm feed in, and broadcast to all operational personnel.”*

Clint’s swallowed hard when Coulson said to him, “Repeat what you said about how to take these things down.”

Clint did as he was told, trying hard not to sound like a complete idiot as he explained about punching through the creatures’ skulls to hit the brain stem. He finished and looked up at Coulson, who nodded.

“Team One, out,” Coulson said, and Clint breathed a sigh of relief. He really wanted to just go back to shooting alligator-things.

“Good work, Barton.” Coulson gave him a pleased-looking nod. “Keep trying to dispatch these creatures as best you can until the replacement ammunition arrives.” This was obviously addressed to all of them, and Clint was more than happy to go back to his job. He managed to take down two more of the alligator-bears before he heard a chopper in the distance, and a voice in his ear said, *“Sky Three to Team One: Coming in for a landing at the northwest corner of the parking structure.”*

“Roger that,” answered Coulson’s voice, and then: *“Watch your heads, people.”* Clint ducked out of the wash of the helicopter blades, shielding his eyes from the dust and debris that the rotors were kicking up. He saw Coulson sprinting over to the chopper and being handed a large ammunition box.

‘He’s no lightweight — he must put in some serious gym time,’ Clint thought as he watched Coulson jogging easily over to Evans with the heavy crate in his hands. Clint turned his attention back to the street below him and looked for his next target. In his ear he could hear Coulson talking to Evans, reassuring him, calming him down. Evans was a decent shot on the range but Clint still thought he was too high strung to make a good sniper. There were other voices on the comms, too, other teams calling out sightings, announcing hits, and chopper pilots delivering ammunition. Clint tried to ignore it all and concentrate on his shooting, but it was difficult, so finally he turned the volume on his comm unit down to its lowest setting. He’d made two more kills when he heard Coulson saying his name sharply and turned his head.

“Boss?”

“Didn’t you hear me calling you on the comms?” Coulson said, looking concerned. He didn’t seem to be pissed, at least.

“Oh, I, uh, turned the volume down. All the talking was distracting me.”

“You’re working on a team, Barton; what Evans, Diaz and I are saying could be important.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean them, or uh, you, I meant all the other teams and the pilots.” Clint was still scanning the street below him and feeding the new ammunition into his rifle by feel as he talked to Coulson.

“You’re hearing the entire operation?”

Clint glanced at him and nodded. Now Coulson did look annoyed as he touched his earpiece. *“Team One Leader, Agent Coulson to Dispatch.”*

Clint faintly heard, *“Dispatch acknowledged, go ahead, Agent Coulson.”*

“I need you to switch Agent Barton’s feed back from the entire operation to just his team.”

“Sorry, sir.”

There was a click in Clint’s ear and the low, constant chatter of voices stopped. Clint nodded and turned the volume back up. Now all he could hear was Evans’ rapid breathing.

“I’ll leave your extra ammunition here,” Coulson said, taking a dozen clips from the box and piling them on the ground.

“Thanks, boss.” Clint finished reloading and went back to work.

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Phil sat at his desk, reading Barton’s after-action report for Operation Ebb Tide (seriously, how did they come up with the names for these things? Was there someone in a tiny office deep in the basement with a box of Scrabble tiles and a notepad?)

He read it through twice then sent Barton an email: “Please stop by my office sometime today.” The discussion he wanted to have with Barton wasn’t particularly urgent, so he was a little surprised when he heard Barton’s distinctive “rat-a-tat-tat” on his door not ten minutes later.

Phil waved him in and watched him flop into one of his guest chairs. “I’ve just been reviewing your after-action report for Operation Ebb Tide. The mutant alligators,” he added at Barton’s blank look.

“Oh, yeah.” Barton straightened up in his chair and looked a little nervous.

Phil wanted to sigh aloud but didn’t. “It’s fine, Barton. Very well written. I just want you to add one thing: a note about the issue you had with the comms.”

“I, uh, didn’t want to get someone in trouble.”
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“That’s admirable, but these things need to be noted so that we can fix problems and make sure they don’t happen again in the future.”

“Okay, what should I say?”

“Something like, ‘Earpiece communications feed inadvertently left at Operation Wide by Central Dispatch, resulting in distraction,’ but use your own words, of course. Here…” Phil swiveled his monitor around and slid his keyboard across his desk so that Clint could amend his report. He tried not to watch Barton’s face as he typed, but the way his forehead furrowed and his lips pursed and his tongue peeped out between them as he concentrated was… adorable.

‘Do not even think about going there, Coulson!’ Phil admonished himself. He shifted his gaze to Barton’s hands on the keyboard, which didn’t help matters much.

“How’s this?” Barton asked, swiveling the monitor back around.

Phil read what Barton had written, which was essentially the wording he had suggested, with ‘Resolved by P. Coulson,’ tacked on.

“Yes, that’s fine. Thank you. I know you’re not used to working on a team and having backup and a support structure in place, but I need you to try to remember to tell me when this kind of thing happens.”

“I would have, boss, really, but I didn’t know that I wasn’t supposed to be hearing the whole op.”

“But it was distracting you enough that you turned the volume on your earpiece all the way down.”

“Well, yeah.”

“So it was a problem for you, and you should have let me know that. Do you understand?” Phil was trying to keep his tone gentle and sincere. He didn’t want Barton to think he’d done something wrong.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Good. There’s something else I’d like to ask you about, about your hearing aid?”

“Um, sure?” Barton didn’t sound so sure.

“I noticed that you took out your hearing aid and put in the comms unit when we suited up. Why do you do it that way rather than wearing your comms in your other ear?”

Barton looked down at the floor and sighed. “I don’t like having anything in my good ear. In case, well, in case something goes wrong.”

“I understand.”

Barton looked up, surprised, as if he was expecting to be told off, or told to wear his comms in his good ear anyway. But Phil could imagine what it must be like to be hearing-impaired, and to want to protect what hearing he did have as best he could. He knew from Barton's file that he could hear somewhat even without his hearing aid; he would never have been certified for field work otherwise.

"It's fine, Barton, I just wanted to know why. So," he said, changing the subject, "How's the World History studies coming along?" When they'd gotten back from the mission in Mexico, Phil had ordered in a bunch of education programs for the topics Clint had expressed interest in.

"It's pretty cool. I'm at the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin was one scary dude. Some of his ideas were kinda cool though."

"Would you be interested in taking a break from Russian history and doing something else for a bit?" Phil asked.

"Sure?" Barton said in a tone that asked what he was being set up for.

Phil pulled a box containing discs and workbooks out of his drawer and held it out to Barton, who took it reflexively.

"High school chemistry," he said. "Show me a 75% grade and I'll schedule you for explosives training with Agent Booker." Phil managed to keep his expression completely neutral only from years of practice.

"Bomb making! You're actually going to let me learn bomb making?" Barton looked like a kid who'd just been handed a twenty dollar bill in a candy store.

"And, un-making. If you ever need to use it, it will more likely be to defuse a bomb, rather than build one, so study hard."

"Sure, boss! Thanks!" Barton bounced up out of his chair. "Uh, sorry, was there anything else?"

"No, that's all." Phil couldn't help smiling a small, fond smile at Barton's retreating back.

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Clint was back from a mission. An assassination. It had gone… Clint didn't know how it had gone. He'd made the shot. Of course he'd made the shot. It hadn't even been a difficult one. And the Senior Agent he'd been assigned seemed happy with him, but… He wanted to talk to Coulson about it. Coulson was always telling him to bring problems to him, reminding him that fixing issues was Coulson's job. Clint had an issue. He just wasn't sure it was one that could be fixed.

Clint rounded the corner into the alcove where Mitchell sat, off which were four doors: Coulson's, Sitwell's, Jefferson's and Ortiz's. He was surprised to see Coulson's office closed, with no light showing under the crack of the door. He mentally checked the day and time. It
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was easy to forget that some people at SHIELD got to work standard nine-to-five schedules, some of the time anyway, but no, it was Wednesday afternoon at 3 p.m.

Jasper Sitwell was talking to Mitchell about something, so Clint kept a pace back and waited until they were finished and Mitchell looked up.

“Can I help you, Agent Barton?”

“Um, I was looking for Coulson.”

“Try the infirmary,” Sitwell said with a raised eyebrow that Clint couldn’t interpret.

“Is he okay?” Clint’s heart had sped up, and he had to ask.

“He’s fine. He got grazed pulling a stupid-ass hero move.” This time Sitwell’s eye roll was perfectly expressive.

“Do you want to schedule some time with him?” asked Mitchell.

“No, uh… that’s fine. I was just stopping by to let him know I was back. I’ll, uh, catch him later.” Clint turned and headed back into the hallway. A few steps later he realized that he was heading for the Medical wing.

‘What do you think you’re doing? Going to make sure he’s okay?’ Clint couldn’t deny that he’d felt a stab of… something when he’d found out that Coulson was hurt. He liked the guy. Clint didn’t really know how to make friends; he’d never had the chance to learn. So after almost two years at SHIELD, he was on “Hey, how’s it going,” terms with a few of the other snipers and a couple of the people he’d met through training (like Tanya Schwarz, who’d taught his swimming classes, and Tyrone Booker, the explosives guy, and of course Tap Harris, the Range Master) but he didn’t have any actual friends. He and Coulson weren’t friends, but they were… friendly colleagues at least. Coulson was a good boss, not that Clint had much to compare against.

And yeah, if he was admitting things in the privacy of his own head, Clint also liked him, liked him. Maybe more than a little. Clint knew himself well enough to understand why he was attracted to mature, stable, competent men. So he liked Coulson. And wished he hadn’t made such a ballsed-up mess of asking him out, last year. Clint stopped in the middle of the corridor. Well, maybe he could avoid making a total idiot of himself this time. Coulson was obviously fine, Sitwell had said so. Clint barging into Medical looking for him wasn’t a good plan. Clint turned and headed back for his quarters.

‘I’ll write up my after-action for the op, and then I can go talk to him about it. That’ll be way less weird,’ he decided.

And besides, writing his after-action for the mission might help him organize his thoughts about said mission, and figure out exactly what it was he wanted to say to Coulson about it.

Clint ensconced himself in his quarters with a bottle of Gatorade, a Snickers bar, and his laptop. He tapped out the after-mission report reasonably quickly, remembering to run the

spell checker when he was done. The report he'd just written made it sound like a by-the-numbers mission. Everything had gone exactly according to plan, no fuss, no muss. That's because it was what happened after they'd completed the mission that Clint had an issue with. An issue that he wanted to talk to Coulson about.

Clint opened his email and typed: "Hey boss. I'm back from SanFran. Mission went okay. I've attached my after-action. I heard you got hurt - hope you're alright! Clint Barton"

Clint attached his mission report to the email and stared at what he'd written for a minute, trying to decide whether to leave the exclamation point in. He went up and replaced it with a period, but that looked… flat. He put the exclamation point back and hit "send" before he could second guess himself some more. He set the software to alert him if he got a reply to the message, and pulled up the SHIELD procedure manual on the internal server. He found the section he was looking for, and started to read.

An hour later his email chimed at him. He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck to try to get the kink out from staring at his screen, then clicked on his email.

Thank you for sending your after-action report so quickly. I'll review it first thing tomorrow. I'm fine, thank you for asking. P. Coulson.

Clint couldn't figure anything out from the tone of Coulson's email, but at least now he knew Coulson was back in his office. And his hour with the procedure manual had given him an idea of what he wanted to say. Clint ran his hand through his hair and put his computer to sleep, then headed for Coulson's office.

"Hey boss," he said, sticking his head around the door. "Got a minute?"

Coulson looked up from the papers he was reading and Clint quickly catalogued everything he could see. Coulson's eyes looked a little tired, but his hair was neat and his tie carefully tied. There was a small bulge in the line of Coulson's suit jacket, halfway between the shoulder and elbow of his left arm.

"Of course, Barton, come in."

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Phil suppressed a fond smile when he looked up and saw Barton grinning at him from the doorway of his office. The op he'd been on had gone sideways, and he was tired and cranky, but Barton's cheerfulness and easy manner made him feel better.

Barton perched one hip on the corner of his desk and ran his hand through his hair before starting to speak.

"So, it's about the mission I just got back from. There's something… I didn't put it in the mission report because, well… I'm not sure I should, and I'm not sure what to say about it."
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“Did something happen?” Phil looked up sharply, his eyes scanning Barton’s frame, looking for any injury.

“No, not really. I mean. It’s hard to explain, and I was kinda hoping I could talk to you about it, uh, off the record? So I was wondering if you’d be willing to have a beer with me sometime. Just to talk, off the record, about the mission.” Barton said the last bit quickly, making it very clear that the discussion he wanted to have was entirely work-related. Phil knew that he’d made Barton feel the need to do that, and hated himself for it.

Phil leaned back in his chair for a moment, thinking. Barton’s handler on the mission had been Peterson. Who was good, but not great, and had risen as high as he was likely to in SHIELD. Phil had never heard of anyone having an issue with him, but he didn’t like working with the man himself. Phil had always felt some vague sense of discomfort or unease about Peterson, and he’d long ago learned to trust his own instincts. So if Barton had had some kind of problem with the man, Phil was more than willing to listen.

“It just so happens that I have had exactly the kind of day that makes me want to go out for a burger and a beer. What do you say we head down to The Waterfront and get some dinner? Then we can talk.”

Phil saw Barton’s eyes go a little wider with surprise as he said, “Um, yeah, that’d be great.”

“Good. All this can wait until tomorrow.” Phil stood up, refrained from stretching his back like he wanted to, and gestured to Barton to precede him out of his office. As he was locking up, he heard Mitchell say, “I see you found him.”

Phil paused. “You were looking for me?”

“Earlier, yeah. I, uh… I wanted to tell you no fair getting hurt when I’m not around to watch your back, boss.” Barton’s trademark cocky grin was firmly in place as he spoke, so Phil ignored the little twinge of… something he felt at the thought of Barton being worried about him.

“We’re heading down to The Waterfront for dinner. I’ve got my phone if anything urgent comes up, but book me off for the night, please,” Phil said to Mitchell, and they headed out.

The Waterfront was a bistro-pub four short blocks walk from Headquarters, and as such was one of the main eating-and-drinking places for SHIELD employees. Phil recognized a dozen agents as he scanned the crowded room, looking for a free table somewhere out of the way, but also, reflexively, double-checking the sight lines and reminding himself where the exits were. At his shoulder, he knew Barton was doing the same: memorizing the layout, cataloguing the defensive positions and listing potential exits in his head.

Phil waited until Barton was done looking, then jerked his head towards a small table for two along one wall. Barton nodded and followed him.

“I guess you’ve eaten here before?” Phil asked.

“Yeah, a couple of times. We came for Diaz’s birthday, a couple of months ago.”

They both spent a few minutes with the menus. When the waiter came around Barton ordered a burger and a basket of chicken wings, and Phil ordered a burger and fries.

“And to drink?”

“Sam Adams, please,” Phil said, and raised his eyebrows at Barton.

“Uh, same for me, thanks.”

While they waited for their food, Barton gestured at his left arm and asked, “So, how did you get clipped?”

Phil sighed.

“I got pulled in at the last minute, because Ortiz’s kid has some sort of emergency medical issue. It should have gone fine; except that at the last minute a civilian appeared out of nowhere and tried to walk between the asset and the mark, and I had to break cover. It must have freaked Evans out, because he missed his first shot, and the mark started shooting back.”

“At you.”

Phil shrugged.

“And you got winged while you were getting the civilian to safety,” Barton said, his eyes narrowing.

Phil nodded.

“Y’know, boss, I’m not sure I like the idea of you going out on ops without me to watch your back.” Barton said it with a wry expression, and Phil allowed himself a very small smile.

“Well, you wouldn’t have missed the shot, that’s for sure,” he said.

Their food arrived and they both spent the next few minutes tucking into their meals.

“Evans is good on the range, he’s just nervous out in the field,” Barton said once he’d demolished his burger.

“Which is not a good quality in a sniper,” Phil said, shaking his head.

“Sorry, what was that?” Phil saw Barton raise one hand to his ear a fiddle with his hearing aid, so he leaned in and said a little more loudly, “Which is bad in a sniper. Are you done eating?” Phil gestured at their empty plates. Barton nodded. “I live three blocks from here.” Phil said, loudly and clearly. “What do you say we go to my apartment and talk there? It’ll be quieter, and more private.”

“Yeah, sure. I guess.”

Phil signaled for the waiter, and they each paid for their own food. Out on the sidewalk in front of the pub, Phil gave a little 'Follow me' jerk of his head and said, "This way."

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Clint stood in the middle of Coulson's living room, glancing around quickly, and taking everything in. Coulson's place was nice. Very nice. Clint had somehow expected Coulson's apartment to be more spartan, but instead it was almost… elegant, in a very comfortable, homey way. The sofa was big and clean and even had one of those throw-blankets folded neatly over the back. There were drapes that matched the sofa. In front of the sofa was a coffee table that matched the small dining table with chairs and two large bookcases - all heavy dark wood that looked old and expensive.

Clint stepped closer to the bookcases. The top of one held an assortment of framed photos: a very young-looking Coulson in an Army uniform with two older people Clint presumed were his parents; another of Coulson in uniform, this time with his unit; Coulson (older now) standing as an usher at a wedding (there was enough family resemblance that Clint figured the bride was his sister). The top of the other bookcase… Clint almost couldn't believe his eyes. It held an assortment of what was obviously old, probably expensive, no doubt carefully collected Captain America memorabilia. There was an action figure, a framed poster, a Captain America rocket car of some kind, and what appeared to be a piggy bank? Clint was wondering how many (if any) of the items were from Coulson's own childhood when the man himself came back into the room, carrying two bottles of beer.

"Really, boss? Captain America?" Clint turned and grinned widely. He was going to be able to tease Coulson forever about this.

"I loved the comics when I was a kid," Coulson said, with a self-deprecating shrug. He held out one of the beers. "Here, sit down."

They sat and clinked bottles and each took a long pull.

"So, tell me about the mission. I skimmed your after-action report when you sent it to me — there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary."

"No, it was fine. The mission was fine. It was well planned and well organized."

"I wouldn't have approved it if it wasn't," Coulson said mildly.

"Yeah," Clint said, taking another pull on his beer. "Yeah, I'm starting to get that."

"So if the mission went fine…"

"It was after. During the mission, Peterson was all calm and cool and professional. He asked a bunch of questions over the comms once I was in my perch, about what I could see and stuff like that, but I figured he was just checking up on me because we hadn't worked together before. The intel said that the mark would show between noon and one, and as it got closer to noon, Peterson seemed to get… not nervous… um… excited, maybe? His voice went a little high, he checked in with me every two minutes, I swear I could hear him tapping
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his pen against the table… But I figured, fine. Everyone's different, this guy just gets a little keyed up. And then the mark showed."

Clint paused, and took another sip of beer. He put the bottle down on the coffee table and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"He, Peterson I mean, was perfectly calm and professional then. We went though the ID procedure; distinguishing marks and all that, and everything matched. And then… You know how you always say 'Take the shot'?"

Coulson nodded.

"Peterson said, 'Waste the fucker'."

Coulson winced.

"So I took the shot, and that was fine. Peterson called in the clean-up crew, all calm and professional and everything went perfectly. Then we met up at the hotel after, and he wants to go out to eat. I figure, sure, okay, and we go to a place near the hotel. And while we're eating, he started asking me a bunch of questions about what I could see through my scope, like the expression on the mark's face, and whether I could see his eyes. I figure maybe it's operational info he needs, so I answer him. Then he asked me to describe the moment I pulled the trigger, and what it felt like. And he's got this look on his face like… like he's getting off on it." Clint tried not to mumble as he talked, though he said the last few words looking down at the carpet between his feet.

"Shit," Coulson said with quiet vehemence. "I'm sorry, Barton. I'll make sure you don't get assigned to work with him again."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot. Guys like that…" he trailed off, not knowing what to say about guys like that.

"I know. I met a few of them when I was in the Army."

"I didn't want to put it on the report because, well, it happened after the mission, and I don't know if he'd done it before or anything, y'know?"

"You did the right thing, telling me. I'll deal with it."

"Thanks. Um, can I ask you something?" Clint had picked up his beer bottle again, for something to do with his hands, and was working one corner of the label loose with his thumbnail.

"Of course." Coulson took another swig of his own beer, tipping the bottle up. Clint found himself staring at the line of Coulson's throat and quickly glanced away.

"I was looking some stuff up in the SHIELD procedure manual. Just to see if, you know, Peterson had actually broken any rules or anything. So I was reading the section on, uh, wet work, and there's a section on 'extraordinary latitude,' that I didn't get. It sounded like maybe it was okay for him to say 'Waste the fucker.' Was it? "

Coulson sighed, and got up off the sofa. He disappeared into the kitchen for a moment and came back with a bottle and two glasses.

“It’s worded vaguely on purpose. It basically means that agents involved in wet work are understood by SHIELD to be under certain…” Coulson paused, choosing his words carefully, “extra strain. And so the normal rules and procedures are understood to apply more… loosely.”

Coulson poured himself a measure of scotch while he was talking, and gestured at the second glass with the bottle.

“Do you want one?”

“Um, yeah. Thanks. A small one though, I don’t drink much. So Peterson was allowed to say ‘Waste the fucker.’”

“Yes. And if you want to scream ‘Yipppee-ki-yay motherfucker’ after you take a shot, technically, I’m supposed to let you.”

Coulson raised his glass and tipped it towards Clint. Clint picked up his own and said, “Uh, cheers.”

“Cheers.”

Clint waited until Coulson had taken a sip of his drink before tasting his. It wasn’t as raw as he remembered whisky being, and tasted vaguely smoky. That probably meant it was expensive. He didn’t like it much, but he realized that Coulson was being friendly by offering what was obviously his ‘good stuff,’ and so he smiled.

“What else are you technically,” Clint emphasized the word by pronouncing each syllable separately, letting a little of his usual snark slip in, “supposed to let me do?”

“I can only give you examples. Latitude means just that, latitude. If, for instance, you wanted to get drunk and trash your hotel room after you’d taken down a mark, SHIELD would quietly pay for the damages.”

“If I wanted to get laid, would they get me a hooker?”

“Yes,” said Coulson quietly, looking into his scotch.

“Oh.” Clint was quiet for a long minute, turning his glass around and around in his hands, thinking. In his peripheral vision, he could see Coulson sitting beside him calmly, his hand clasped around his drink and resting on one knee.

“What if… what if I only wanted you to be my handler for wet work?” he asked softly.

There was a pause.

“Barring extenuating circumstances, such as me being injured and unfit for duty, for instance, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I, uh… would you? I mean, I know it’d be a pain for you, having to do missions that you wouldn’t otherwise. It’s just that…” ‘You’re solid, dependable. You make me feel comfortable. I trust you.’ Clint wanted to say, but he couldn’t. “You say ‘Take the shot’,” he finally said, hoping Coulson would understand.

“If you’d prefer me to be your handler for all wet work assignments from now on, Barton, then that’s what will happen.” Coulson’s voice was calm and reassuring.

“Thanks.” Clint glanced over at Coulson. “That’d be… thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Clint was very glad that Coulson didn’t say anything about it being his job. That made it feel a little bit like he was doing a favor for a friend. And sitting here on Coulson’s sofa, drinking Coulson’s scotch and looking at Coulson’s collection of Captain American memorabilia, Clint thought that maybe they could be friends. One day.

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“Yes, sir, I understand that, but I’m sure we can work this out if you’ll just…” Phil made sure he had taken his thumb off the ‘broadcast’ button for the megaphone before sighing heavily. The man he was talking to, Dr. Ellis Green (if he had used his real name on the lease for the warehouse they were all standing in), started to recite chemical formulas again.

“Is he saying anything that makes any sense?” Phil asked the SHIELD chemist who was standing next to him.

“Not that I can tell, Agent Coulson.”

Phil wanted to sigh again but refrained. SHIELD had been called in by the DEA when the meth lab they had busted turned out to be a lot more complicated than just a meth lab, and then partway through the proceedings an unassuming scientist type had grabbed a cop’s gun and taken one of his lab assistants hostage. The NYPD hostage negotiator had talked to the man for an hour. Phil had tried for another thirty minutes, but the scientist kept lapsing into a shrill recitation of chemical formulas.

Phil tapped his earpiece. *“Talk to me, Barton.”*

“The guy’s twitchy, boss, and getting twitchier by the minute.”

Phil suppressed a sigh once again. He hated for it to end this way, but he didn’t see any other option.

“Do you have the shot?”

“Yes. But boss? I can disarm the guy without killing him.”

Phil looked at the mad scientist holding an unfortunate New York cop’s service weapon in a very shaky hand. They’d confirmed visually that the scientist knew enough about guns to have taken the safety off, and so they had to assume that he was willing to shoot the almost
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catatonic assistant, who'd given up begging a while back and was now just heaving quiet sobs every so often. He tried to extrapolate the angle of the shot from where Barton had scrambled up into the rafters of the building. If Barton said he could disarm the man…

"Are you sure, Barton?"

"Yes."

Phil didn't ask twice. One thing he'd learned (one of many) was that Barton never exaggerated his skill. If he said he could make a shot, he could.

"Okay, listen up, people. Here's what we're going to do." Phil spoke quietly on the comms, using the megaphone to shield his mouth from the scientist with the gun, just in case.

"Barton is going to disarm the target on my mark. As soon as you hear Barton's shot—and not a moment before—Phillips, I want to you secure the target and Dunn, you secure the hostage. I'll secure the weapon." He tapped his comm link again, switching channels.

"This is Agent Coulson of SHIELD, currently in command of this operation. I'm about to give the order for our sniper to fire on the target. Everyone else hold your fire. I repeat, hold your fire, no matter what happens. Coulson out." Phil went back to the SHIELD-only channel.

"Everyone ready?" He got a chorus of 'Yes, sirs' and one 'Yes, boss.'

"Barton, take your shot."

Phil locked his eyes on the gun in the scientist's hand, ready to follow its trajectory like a golf ball hit by a pro. Two heartbeats later, he heard the crack of Barton's rifle and saw the gun fly back out of the scientist's hand and smash into a wooden pallet that was leaning up against the back wall of the warehouse. Agents Phillips and Dunn were moving, and Phil trusted them to do their jobs. He also trusted Barton to have the target in his sights, just in case. He dropped the megaphone and headed for the back wall at a sprint. There was yelling and more sobbing behind him as Phillips subdued the scientist and Dunn moved the hostage out of range. Phil scanned the ground near the pallet. He spotted the revolver and picked it up.

"Weapon secure," he said. *"NYPD can move in to arrest the target. SHIELD personnel start assessment of the facility. Get a medic in here for the hostage."* Phil clicked his comms back to the SHIELD channel. He was running his thumb along the groove in the barrel of the revolver. The groove left by the bullet from Barton's rifle. He'd targeted the barrel. Not the just the gun, or the scientist's hand, but the barrel. So that if worst came to worst and the scientist somehow managed to pull the trigger in the millisecond between Barton firing and the gun being knocked out of his hand, the barrel wouldn't be pointing at the hostage's temple.

"Very nice shooting, Barton," Phil said, letting the admiration he felt come through in his voice.

"Thanks, boss. I'm heading back down now."

Two hours later they were standing side-by side in the SHIELD locker rooms. Barton was stripping down for a shower and Phil was swapping his bulletproof vest and SHIELD windbreaker for his suit jacket.

“When you’re done cleaning up, stop by my office, will you?”

“Sure thing, boss.” Barton had one of his trademark cocky grins on his face as he headed for the showers, a towel slung low around his hips. Phil purposefully turned away and didn’t watch his ass.

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Twenty minutes later, Clint stood outside Coulson’s office door, freshly showered and wearing a pair of clean uniform pants and a grey SHIELD t-shirt. He wasn’t going to admit to anyone that he’d dressed a little more carefully than usual, picking his best-looking pants, a shirt that was just a bit tight across his chest and arms, tying his boots properly, and even running his fingers through his damp hair until it lay sort-of neatly. Coulson’s neatness was catching, Clint told himself. He admired the man, so it was natural to try to emulate him, just a little, he rationalized. He tried to ignore the little voice in the back of his head that was calling him a liar, and pointing out that he just wanted to look good for Coulson. Because he liked him.

Clint knocked his distinctive “rat-a-tat-tat” on Coulson’s door and waited for the familiar call of ‘Come.’ When it did, he bounced into the room and threw himself down on Coulson’s sofa.

“Good work today, Barton.” Coulson said from behind his desk, but turned to look at him, smiling and looking warm like he always did when he complimented Clint’s work.

“Thanks, boss. I, uh… I figured you would want to know that I saw an option that didn’t involve killing the guy.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Oh, and, uh… I wanted to say thanks, for getting me this.” Clint touched his left ear, where he was wearing the integrated hearing aid and comms unit that Coulson had requisitioned for him, having put it back in after his shower. “It works great and it’s more comfortable than my old hearing aid, too.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yeah, it makes things a lot easier not to have to switch out my hearing aid for the comms unit, and it means I can hear what’s going on better in briefings and during wrap up and stuff.” Clint bounced his knee, still riding a bit of an adrenaline high from the successful mission.

But he was brought back down to earth with a thud when Coulson opened a file-folder and said, “I see it also means you’ve figured out what Requisition Form 376-B is for.”
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“Oh,” said Clint. When the biomedical engineering guy who’d given him his new hearing aid/comm unit had handed him a pile of paperwork to go with it, he hadn’t thought anything of it. He’d been shoving the papers into the drawer of his tiny desk where he kept stuff that he figured was probably important when he noticed the title of the top form: ‘*Request for specialized field equipment*’. He’d downloaded a copy of the form from SHIELD’s servers, filled it in, and sent it to the engineering department.

“I, uh, figured it couldn’t hurt to uh, try,” he said, trying for nonchalance and instead starting to fidget under Coulson’s gaze. To his mortification he felt the tips of his ears burning. He was sure Coulson could see them turning pink. ‘Here we go. Here’s where he hands me my ass,’ Clint thought.

“Why do you want a bow, Barton?”

Clint blurted the first thing that he could think of: “I’m better with a bow than a gun.”

“Better.”

Clint could hear the note of incredulity in Coulson’s voice, but for once he didn’t get angry the way he usually did when someone questioned his skill. It was understandable; only someone who’d seen him with shoot a bow could really understand.

“Um, yeah. I’m more comfortable with a bow. I did a little practice with a rifle while I was in the circus, but ammunition cost money, so… With a bow, so long as I didn’t break an arrow, I could practice for hours at a time, and I did. I had to. So I’m uh… more accurate.”

Coulson didn’t repeat ‘more accurate,’ though it looked to Clint like he wanted to. Instead he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Convince me that there are tactical advantages to using a bow instead of a rifle in the field.”

A small knot of excitement clenched in the pit of Clint’s stomach. If he could convince Coulson… “A bow is almost silent. Much quieter than a gun, even one with a suppressor,” he said, “so it would be really useful for taking out a mark when there are other people around that you don’t want to alert. On infiltration ops and stuff like that. Like in Mexico, I could have taken out the sentries.” Clint knew he was talking too fast and tried to calm down.

“A bow is silent. Okay, what else?” Coulson looked at him with challenge, but no malice. He seemed honestly willing to be convinced, if Clint could come up with good enough arguments.

“Um, well, in the circus sometimes I used trick arrows to do stuff… like… like a flaming arrow. It can set fire to something from far away.”

“So can a flare gun.”

“Okay, yeah, I guess. Um, or maybe the techie guys could rig an exploding arrow, to you know, blow something up.”

“Or you could use an RPG.” But Coulson’s tone was even, not mean or teasing.

Clint's face fell. There had to be something… "An arrow can carry a payload. A bullet can't do that."

"Payload?" Coulson looked interested now, though it only showed in his eyes, not his body language.

"Yeah, like… like a tracking device! Or a microphone. I could shoot a transmitter in through an open window, up into the rafters of a building, and we could get ears without someone having to sneak into the place to plant a bug." Clint was talking fast again, excited and triumphant. "Or a miniature camera, even!"

Coulson nodded. "I'll think about it."

"There are other things, I'm sure. Just give me a minute to think."

"I have a meeting, Barton. Send me an email."

"I will, boss. I'll think of a bunch more ways that I could use a bow in the field, and I'll email them to you."

"You do that."

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To: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
From: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
Subject: ways a bow could be useful in the field

Hi boss. Here's a bunch of stuff I thought of

- I can shoot around corners with a bow - if the wind is right that is
- Arrows could be used to deliver a message if the comms go down
- Some other "trick" arrows I thought of are: acid, grappling hook, net, magnetic, suction-cup (for sticking to a window or something), flash-bang
- An arrow could be fitted with a tranq dart. I know we have tranq guns, but they can't be silenced. Or like, medication, in an emergency, like an antidote to a poison or something.
- light-up arrow, for searching buildings in the dark when you want your hands free
- I can fire hand-holds into a cliff for climbing

I'll send you some more ideas as soon as I think of them.

Clint Barton

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Three days later Clint found that four hours of the afternoon had been blocked off in his schedule for 'Meeting with P. Coulson.'

"Hey, boss, do we have a mission?" Clint found Coulson's office door open and the man himself standing behind his desk, straightening a stack of folders.

"No, a field trip."

"A field trip? What kind of field trip? Where are we going? Is it just the two of us?" Clint peppered Coulson with questions as he followed him out of his office and down the corridors towards the motor pool.

"It's just the two of us, and you'll see when we get there," Coulson answered. Clint couldn't tell if Coulson was annoyed with him or just being a pain, getting him back, maybe for the dirty joke he had told on the comms at the end of the last mission. He'd apologized to Coulson, afterwards, but…

Coulson signed out a nondescript grey sedan and told Clint to get in. They drove through relatively light New York traffic for half an hour and pulled up in front of a very large hunting and fishing outfitters. Clint didn't know what was going on until Coulson led him into the store and past the duck decoys, hip waders, and blaze orange jackets to stand in front of a large rack of bows. Hunting bows. Compound bows and recurves and crossbows. Several dozen of them.

"I want you to show me which one of these would work best in the field for the kind of applications we've been discussing," Coulson said quietly.

Clint tried hard not to look crestfallen. He'd been hoping that SHIELD would actually build a cool bow, especially for him, like the integrated comms unit/hearing aid in his ear. But just getting a bow, any bow, and being able to practice with it and maybe use it on missions sometimes, well, that would be pretty great too. And besides, maybe they were still going to make trick arrows for him.

"I guess, uh… I guess price isn't an issue, since SHIELD is paying," Clint said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice as he scanned the rack in front of him.

Coulson must have figured it out, though, because he said, "Relax, Barton. SHIELD isn't buying you a bow. If your 376-B requisition is approved, SHIELD will be building you one or more custom-made bows. This is research; data we're collecting in support of your requisition."

"Right," Clint said, and now he was trying to hide his excitement. SHIELD was going to build him a bow! Maybe even more than one! Coulson had said! If his requisition was approved. But if Coulson was on board with it, then surely… Clint dragged his thoughts back to the rack of bows in front of him, and picked one up. It was lighter than he expected, given its size, and he wondered what it was made out of. 'Aluminum and carbon fiber' read the label.

Coulson seemed content to just stand there, waiting, so Clint spent a long time looking. He picked up all the likely-looking candidates to test their weight and balance. He looked carefully at the pulleys and cams on the compound bows and flexed the limbs of the recurves. After a long deliberation, all the bows save two were back on the rack. Clint had a compound bow in one hand and a recurve in the other, and was looking back-and-forth between the two.

“I’m having trouble deciding between these two,” Clint said.

“I can see that.” Coulson took a step forward and looked at the bows in Clint’s hands. “They look pretty different.”

“They are. This one’s a compound, and this one’s a recurve. The compound can take a heavier draw, which means I could shoot further with it. It takes less skill, less practice, less getting used to, and is more reliable in bad weather.”

“But?”

“It’s got a lot of moving parts,” Clint said, gesturing to the upper flywheel with his chin, “and that means lots of points of failure. And it’s almost impossible to repair or even adjust in the field.”

Coulson nodded.

“And the other one?”

“I learned on a recurve, so I’m more comfortable with them, but every recurve is very different. They’re less forgiving than compounds, so it takes more practice to get used to one. And it can’t handle as much draw, which means I can’t shoot as far. But it’s more reliable. And it’s almost impossible to break a well-made recurve, unlike a compound.”

“Fine, take both,” Coulson said with a nod.

“Take both? I thought you said SHIELD wasn’t buying me a bow? I thought we were just gathering data, like, I don’t know, the technical specs on these or something.” Clint gestured with the bows in his hands.

“Those,” Coulson waved his hand to indicate both bows, “are coming out of petty cash. Part of the necessary research for your 376-B.” Clint saw the glint in Coulson’s eye, and realized that his handler had planned this all along.

“Right. So, are we getting arrows too, for research purposes?” Clint asked, drawing the word ‘research’ out for emphasis.

“Of course,” said Coulson. Now his eyes were sparkling, and he was wearing a small smile. “How else are you going to demonstrate how well you can shoot?”

Clint grinned widely and turned towards the arrows, but as he did, something caught his eye. There was a small display of specialized bows, and he reached out and ran the tip of one finger along the smooth grain of a small, simple, handcrafted wooden bow.

“I had one like this, once. My last year at the circus. Trickshot gave it to me. He said he had it specially made for me by an Indian. He probably stole it or won it in a poker game or something, and I realized later that he was just buttering me up so I’d go along with his scheme, but at the time, I felt like I’d earned it. It was the nicest thing I ever owned.” Clint shook his head a little sadly, and was glad that Coulson didn’t say anything.

“Now this, this is something special,” Clint said, turning to next bow in the same display, which was also wood, but much larger. “Reproduction of a traditional English longbow. 100-pound draw. I’ve always wanted to try one, never got the chance.” He gave the longbow a pat and turned to the display of arrows. “Okay, let’s see what our options are…”

Clint pulled arrows out of the display and measured them against his arm, selecting a dozen small-tipped ones for target purposes, Coulson’s words ‘demonstrate how well you can shoot’ ringing in his ears. He also picked up a few sharp-tipped hunting arrows, figuring he should probably demonstrate them as well.

“Anything else you need?”

“Nope, this should be good.”

“What about an arm guard and a shooting glove?” Coulson asked mildly.

“I see someone’s been doing his research,” Clint said. “Yeah, a glove is probably a good idea. I don’t need a guard just to show you how these bows work.”

“Get one anyway.”

“It’s your company credit card,” Clint said. He was bouncing with excitement now. He chose his guard and glove from the available options, checking them for fit. “Okay, boss, I’m good to go.”

Coulson glanced at his watch. “That’s good, because we’re running a little late.”

Clint didn’t ask ‘late for what’ because now he could guess what the next part of the afternoon was going to entail. At least he hoped he could. Coulson had said that Clint would be demonstrating how well he could shoot with a bow…

Sure enough, after Coulson paid for all the gear with a nondescript looking credit card, he bundled them back into the car and after another half-hour drive (north, this time), pulled up in front of an archery club. Coulson had, of course, rented the entire place out. Clint thought about making a joke about what SHIELD considered petty cash, but he was too excited to think about anything except shooting. The place was deserted, but there were a range of targets and a set of basic tools laid out waiting for them.

“Um, it’s going to take me a few minutes to set this up properly so I can shoot with it,” Clint said.

“Take your time. Is there anything I can do?” Clint glanced down the range at the targets that were set up at the other end.

“No, it’s fine.” He laid the recurve bow on the counter and set to work with one of the tools, while Coulson looked on. He worked quickly and surely, and soon he was ready to start shooting. He looked at the plastic bag full of arrows and his face fell.

“I, uh, forgot to get a quiver. Would you… would you hold my arrows?” Clint asked, his ears going a little pink at the way that sounded.

“Certainly, Barton, I’d be delighted,” Coulson deadpanned, and Clint laughed a high, slightly nervous laugh, but Coulson just smiled his little quirk of a smile.

“Okay, this is a brand new bow, and the string’s not stretched properly, and it’s been like, two years since I shot one, so I probably won’t be too accurate for the first few shots until I get used to it.”

“I understand, like needing to zero your rifle sights.”

“Yeah, kinda.” Clint relaxed a little, now that Coulson wouldn’t expect him to be perfect with his first shot.

Clint took an arrow from Coulson and walked up to the shooting line on the floor. He chose one of the targets on the far wall. He settled into his stance, shrugged his shoulders to loosen them, drew, and sighted. He let out a shallow breath and released. The arrow hit the blue outer ring of the target. Clint glanced over at Coulson for his reaction, but his face was impassive, and he simply handed Clint a second arrow.

His next shot hit the yellow ring, about two inches left of the center X. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Coulson’s small nod, and the tightness in his guts unclenched. He shot the rest of the arrows Coulson was holding, moving from target to target along the far wall of the range. They went to retrieve the arrows together, and Clint could see Coulson’s surprise at how much force he needed to exert to pull them back out.

“You could do some serious damage with these.”

“Well, they’re designed for stopping a three-hundred pound buck, and killing it as quickly and humanely as possible,” Clint said. Which Coulson had known, obviously, after spending all that time in the hunting gear section of the store with him, but knowing it and understanding on a gut level were different. Clint hoped that maybe Coulson was re-evaluating the field use of a bow and arrows. “So, uh, how long do we have the place for?” he asked, wondering how long he was going to get to shoot for.

“As long as you want. I gave the manager a cover story about training an actor for a role in a film, but I told him that the identity of the actor was top-secret, and that the studio didn’t want any leaks about the plot.”

“Cool. It’s okay if I shoot some more then?” He didn’t want Coulson to get bored.

“I’ll let you know if I get tired of holding your arrows,” Coulson said, with that small smile that Clint was beginning to very much enjoy seeing on his handler’s face.

Clint shot. And shot, and shot. After an hour he put the recurve bow down and picked up the compound. While he was setting it up, Coulson went to the far wall to unpin the used paper targets, and put up a range of fresh ones.

“Do you want to keep any of these?” he asked as he unpinned the last sheet, which bore a set of holes that made a smiley-face design.

“Not unless you think I should include one as part of the backup material for my 376-B.” Clint looked up and grinned at Coulson as he walked back up the range.

“You’re learning,” Coulson said with an approving nod, “but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

Clint spent an hour with the compound bow, then went back to the recurve for a while. After so long away from shooting, it was like… well it wasn’t like anything else. He loved it, pure and simple. But he could tell that Coulson was starting to lose interest, even though he hadn’t said anything, and was patiently standing next to him, handing him one arrow at a time.

“I wonder if there’s a spare quiver around somewhere. I’d just like to try some speed shooting, and then, uh, we can go.”

A quick search of the equipment racks yielded a quiver that Clint was happy with, and he filled it and slung it over his shoulder. He adjusted the strap so that it sat comfortably on his back, and settled back into his shooting stance. Even though Coulson had no ‘job’ to do, he still stood next to Clint at the line.

“I’m gonna start slow and then speed up.”

“Roger.”

Clint reached back for an arrow, finding the fletching with his fingers and pulling it smoothly out of the quiver. He nocked, drew, and fired. He shot another, and another, and another, letting his body learn where the quiver was, letting his arm muscles memorize the motion of reaching behind his head, letting his fingers learn where to find the flights. After the first ten, he sped up a little, after another five, he was shooting fast, and he shot the last five as fast as he could.

“Gonna go get those and do it one more time, then I’ll be done, I guess.”

“Sounds good,” Coulson said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting hungry.”

“I could eat a horse,” Clint said, suddenly realizing how hungry he was.

“I’m not surprised, after shooting for almost two hours. We’ll stop for take-out on the way back to the office,” Coulson said as he walked down the lane with him and helped retrieve the arrows.

Back at the line, Clint filled the quiver with arrows and shrugged it onto his back. He rolled his neck and shoulders, then settled into his stance. He went completely still, looking down the range at the targets on the wall. Without warning, he started to shoot, drawing and firing

as quickly as he could. After the first ten arrows, he stopped. Next to him, Coulson whistled a long, low, impressed-sounding whistle.

“Want to time me on the last ten?” Clint knew he was showing off, but he didn’t care. So what if he wanted to impress Coulson. It was going to help get him a bow, right?

“Sure,” said Coulson, raising his left arm and pushing the buttons on his watch to put it into stopwatch mode. “You’ll need to call your start and finish, because I’m not sure I’ll be able to count accurately.”

“No problem. I’ll say ‘now’ when I start, and ‘ten’ when I’m shooting the last arrow, okay?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Coulson said, finger poised on the button of his watch, and his eyes fixed on the target on the far wall.

Clint took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders again, and settled. He raised the bow, and put his arm behind his head, his fingers on the fletching of an arrow.

“Now!” Clint shot. Fast and smooth and accurate, putting all ten arrows in the yellow center ring of the target. “Ten!”

“Twelve seconds. You shot ten arrows in twelve seconds.” Coulson said, his tone incredulous.

“Not bad. If I get some decent practice in, I should be able to bring that down a bit.”

“Down a bit. Half the snipers in SHIELD couldn’t hit a target ten times in twelve seconds with a rifle.”

“Yeah, well,” Clint shrugged, but he was grinning like a fool, because the real admiration in Coulson’s voice had sparked a warm glow in his chest.

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“What you need to do, is take these bows as a starting point, and detail everything that you want to keep, and everything you want changed or made better.” Coulson said, gesturing at the sheets of paper that were spread out on the table, on the sofa between them, and on the floor.

They were back in Coulson’s office. They had picked up a large quantity of Indian take-out on the way back to SHIELD, and Coulson had explained the intricacies of a properly-submitted 376-B request form while they were eating. It seemed like a hell of a lot of work, but it was work Clint was more than willing to do.

“So, you mean I get to tell the, uh, engineering guys what I want in a bow, and they’ll build it?”

“The thing is, if you want a really good bow, you need to show them exactly what you need, and why. Remember, these guys will have probably never even held a bow like those,” Coulson gestured to the two newly-purchased bows leaning against the wall in a corner of his
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office, “let alone shot one, or have any idea what one can do. You need to explain all of that to them, and show them exactly what you want.”

“Oh,” said Clint. This was starting to sound impossible. “How do I do that?”

“Can you draw?”

“Um, I’ve never tried. I could learn?” Clint was willing to learn just about anything if it meant that SHIELD would build him a custom bow.

“Hmm.” Coulson got up, opened his bottom desk drawer, and pulled out a thick book, which he handed to Clint. “How about learning this instead?”

Computer-Assisted Design read the cover.

“Okay.” Clint said, hefting the heavy book in his hand. He could do this. He’d learned to type and jump out of airplanes and use his laptop properly. He had passed high school chemistry and learned how to trace which wires went to the detonator while a bomb was ticking in his ear. He could learn how to design a bow on a computer.

“Okay,” he said again, quietly, meeting Coulson’s eyes with a tacit promise to rise to the challenge. “But, um, if I’m going to design a bow, I’m gonna need to do some more, uh, research. I mean, I’ve read a few books on the history of archery and stuff, but I don’t remember the details well enough.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been here over a year and you don’t know that SHIELD has a library?”

“Well, yeah, of course, it was on our orientation tour. But I didn’t figure it had anything that I’d be interested in. The library’s got books on bows?”

“If it’s a book about weapons, wars, politics, or poisons, SHIELD has it. Believe me.”

“Cool. I’ll check it out tomorrow.”

“Go in the morning and ask for Sarah. She’ll help you find what you need.”

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Two weeks later, Clint was walking down the hall towards Coulson’s office. Walking with his head held high and a spring in his step. He was happy. Happier than he could remember being in a long, long time. He was finally starting to feel like maybe he could fit in at SHIELD, and he was so busy these days that somehow the occasional snide comment from someone about his background didn’t bother him as much as it used to. He was working hard and learning all sorts of cool stuff. Coulson was helping him write up his 376-B requisition for a bow, and though his handler was always very careful not to guarantee that the requisition would be approved, Clint was sure it would be. After all, Coulson knew how these things worked, and he wouldn’t be putting in this much time—wouldn’t be letting Clint put in this much time and effort—if he wasn’t pretty sure it would be approved. Coulson wouldn’t set him up to fail; Clint was absolutely certain of that.
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There was just one thing missing in his life, and maybe now he could get to work on that, too.

“Out clubbing last night, Barton?” Coulson asked with a raised eyebrow as Clint threw himself down on the sofa in Coulson’s office.

“Clubbing? No,” Clint saw the direction of Coulson’s gaze and ran his hand through his hair, causing a few more small shiny flakes to come loose and drift onto Coulson’s carpet. “Ty, ah, Agent Booker has a strange sense of humor. He rigs the practice bombs I’m learning to defuse with glitter, so if I screw up… The stuff is impossible to get out, even in the shower.” Clint shot Coulson a rueful grin.

“And now it’s all over my sofa.”

“Sorry, boss.” Clint tried to look suitably apologetic.

“We have a new mission to plan. It’s an assassination.” Coulson said, handing a folder across his desk. Clint stood up to get it and opened it. The picture clipped to the front page of the sheaf of documents was a grainy still from surveillance camera footage. Clint sat down in the chair in front of Coulson’s desk rather than going back to the sofa.

“He’s a high-level Hydra agent,” Coulson continued, “responsible for the deaths of a number of SHIELD agents and civilians, and tasked with acquiring experimental weapons. The Intelligence Division has been running an op for the last six months, convincing him that a SHIELD turncoat is willing to sell some of our research. I’ll make the meet, and you’ll take him out.”

Clint was flipping through the documents which detailed the mark’s past activities and his capabilities.

“He looks like a pretty dangerous guy, boss.”

“He is, but I’ll have you watching my back the whole time. We’ll choose the location for the meet based on your recommendation, and you’ll be set up, ready to take your shot by the time he arrives.”

“Okay, but if he so much as twitches towards you, I’m dropping him,” Clint said with a vehemence that surprised himself.

Coulson nodded. “That’s fine. We just need him to show up to the meet, I don’t need to actually make an exchange or anything.”

They spent the next hour discussing how much time Clint would need to survey the area and decide where he wanted to perch, and the backup, contingency, and safe-house arrangements.

“Did you get this assignment because I asked for you to be my handler for assassinations?” Clint asked.

“Mostly,” Coulson said. “It would have gone to a senior agent, so there’s a chance I would have gotten it anyway.”

“But you don’t usually do this kind of fieldwork.” Coulson was going to be out in the open with a dangerous Hydra agent because of him, and Clint wasn’t happy about that.

“Not usually, no. I used to.” Coulson raised his eyebrows, sat back, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m entirely capable of taking care of myself in the field, Barton.”

“Of course, I know that. I’ve seen you sparring with Sitwell in the gym, and I’ve seen you shoot, you’re good. It’s not that.”

“What is it then?”

“I dunno, it just seems too easy somehow. The guy shows up and I shoot him.”

“The agents in Intelligence who’ve spent the last six months setting this up would be pretty pissed if they heard you say that,” Coulson said, and seemed to relax again, picking up his pen to make a note.

“Yeah, okay. I guess.” Clint leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair, dislodging a few more flakes of glitter. “So speaking of going clubbing, which we weren’t, but… can I ask you something, boss? It’s, uh, not strictly work-related.”

Coulson leaned back in his own chair, folded his arms back across his chest and gave Clint a small nod.

“So I’m, uh, dating. Or trying to, anyway. But the first question everyone asks is, ‘What do you do?’ And of course I can’t tell them I work for a secret government organization as an assassin, obviously. So I usually say I work in private security. Which is a problem, because half the guys I meet get totally turned off by the idea of a Blackwater-type gun for hire, because they think I shoot people for a living.”

“You do shoot people for a living,” Coulson said mildly.

“Yeah, so okay fine, they’ve got a fair reason for running in the other direction. But the other half, well, they start asking if I’ve seen action and want to swap war stories, or they start telling me about their weird-assed conspiracy theories, or they ask me if I’ve ever killed anyone and what it felt like…”

Clint saw the distaste on Coulson’s face.

“So, I was wondering, since you’re really good at all this undercover stuff, if you’d be willing to help me come up with a, uh, cover. For dating. I tried to think of something, but I can’t see myself pretending to be an insurance salesman or something…” Clint trailed off, watching Coulson’s expression. Which was blank, and Clint was worried that he was about to be told off for wasting his handler’s time. But Coulson unfolded his arms, and held one finger up in a ‘wait a minute’ gesture, then typed something on his computer and spent a minute reading.

“High steel worker,” he said, turning back to Clint, and turning the computer monitor towards him as well.

“Huh?” Clint leaned forward in his chair to see the monitor.

“Tell them you're in construction, a high steel worker. It accounts for your build, and most people won’t know very much about the business so you won't get too many awkward questions. You can disappear for weeks at a time because you got a contract building a bridge or a tower or something in another city. The only problem is that you're not Mohawk, but only about half the high-steel workers are, not all of them, so you can explain that. You can even talk about your real childhood with the circus, your tightrope and trapeze work if you like, to explain why you're so good with heights."

"That's perfect! Coulson, you are brilliant!"

"Yes."

"Wow. I just need to do some Googling to find out what words to throw around, and buy one of those big metal lunch boxes. Fantastic! I wonder where I could get a purple hard hat? Thanks so much, boss!"

“Anytime, Barton. We have a full briefing for the mission from the Intelligence Division tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred, though, so you might want to try to make it an early night.”

“Don’t worry, boss, I’ll be there bright-eyed and bushy tailed. Whatever the fuck that’s supposed to mean.” Clint bounced up out of his chair and sketched a wave as he left Coulson’s office.

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Phil left his hotel and walked south. He’d been a little unsure at first, when Barton had proposed setting up the meet at the docks, but he’d been willing to be convinced. The sprawling dockyard was poorly patrolled and easy to access. The chances of them being seen or interrupted were very small—compared to say, a back alley somewhere—while at the same time being relatively open, which meant there was little-to-no chance that the bad guys could surround and trap them. And, most importantly, the sound of Barton’s gunshot would be carried out to sea.

He strode confidently past convenience stores, bars, and check-cashing places, aware that his tailored suit and shiny aluminum briefcase made him stick out like a sore thumb. He had his gun on his hip (and a backup in an ankle holster), and he trusted his training and his instincts. And his team.

This op had taken months to set up. The Intelligence Division had planted a mole, the mole had led the Hydra agent to a dealer, the dealer had led to a middleman, and finally, earlier this week, the middleman had introduced Coulson as a provider of specialized weaponry. The Hydra agent had, of course, insisted on a private meeting. Phil had (as per Barton’s idea) suggested the dockyards. It meant that Sitwell and the backup team had to stay fairly far out, but Phil trusted Barton to have his back.

“Boss?” Phil’s earpiece crackled a little as Barton’s voice came through. He pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket and pretended to answer it.

“Make it quick, Barton.”
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"Just wanted you to know that I've spotted a guy I think is our mark. A silver sedan drove past the main gates twice, then parked over by the office buildings. I'm trying to keep an eye on him, but I don't want to move out of position."

"Stay where you are, and stay under cover. If he's the mark, he'll show up for the meet."

"Gotcha. What's your ETA?"

"I'm about three minutes out. Check in with Sitwell and confirm backup, will you? I don't want both my hands occupied in this neighborhood."

"Will do, boss. Hawkeye to Sitwell."

Phil put the phone back in his pocket and glanced around to make sure he hadn't attracted any undue attention.

"Sitwell here."

"Coulson says he's three minutes to the meet location. He wanted me to check with you that backup is in place."

"Everything's in place, Phil," said Sitwell, "backup, clean-up crew, we've even got a boat in the water in case someone decides to go for a swim."

Phil put his hand back into his pocket and pushed the "0" on his phone keypad twice to acknowledge. Then he pressed the "1" once.

"I've got 360 degrees visual and the coast is clear, boss. Come on in," Barton's voice came in reply.

Phil knew that Barton was tucked into the superstructure of a nearby loading crane, and so was careful not to let his eyes linger on it as he swept the area once, then headed towards a stack of orange shipping containers.

He slid his hand into his jacket pocket one last time, pressed the '3' button on his phone, and then tapped his toe twice against the dusty concrete of the yard.

"Confirming that I can see the go signal, boss."

Phil then put his hand down by his side and tapped a tight fist against his thigh.

"Confirming that I can see the abort signal. Looks like our man is coming in from the northeast corner. Ready when you give the signal."

Phil nodded very slightly, knowing that Barton would be able to see it. He arranged his face into an expression that was bland, patient, almost bored, and waited. After a minute he heard footsteps coming from the northeast, and forced himself to stay relaxed. A figure stepped around the end of the shipping container and stood motionless, looking at him. He was just far enough away that Phil couldn't be 100% sure of the ID yet. He took two paces forward, a sign of goodwill, and stopped. The mark moved and–

“Coulson, duck!”

Barton’s voice in his ear was urgent, and he ducked, bringing the briefcase up to shield his head as a bullet whizzed past his left ear. He heard another shot, dropped the case, unholstered his gun, and tried to dive for cover, but the mark was already on top of him.

“Sitwell, backup! Now!” Barton’s voice was so loud in his earpiece that Phil was sure the mark could hear it. It made the man unleash a stream of invective in Dutch, which Phil had always thought of as a graceful language, up until now. Then he didn’t have time to think of anything because he was fighting for his life.

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“Barton, sit-rep!” barked Sitwell on the comms. *“What’s going on?”*

“The other side had a sniper as well; he took a shot at Coulson. I got him, but the mark jumped Coulson and they’re fighting. I can’t get a clear shot from here, they’re moving too much. I’m going in.” Clint said as he slung his rifle across his back and started to climb down from his perch.

“Backup is on its way in. Med team stand by, clean-up team stand by.” Sitwell issued the orders sharply.

Clint wasn’t paying any attention to Sitwell as he clambered down from the crane as quickly as he could. He kept his eyes moving, checking the crate where the second sniper had been hidden, watching for backup (their own or the other guys’), and trying to keep an eye on where Coulson was grappling with the mark. Coulson was good. Clint had seen him in action a couple of times on missions, and had watched him spar with Sitwell in the gym. But the mark was just as good, and had at least four inches and thirty pounds on Coulson.

Clint jumped the last ten feet off the crane and sprinted across the tarmac. The mark was on top of Coulson, one arm across his throat and the other hand trying to force Coulson’s own gun towards his head. Clint unslung his rifle from his back and smashed the butt viciously into the side of the mark’s head. The force of the blow knocked the man away and he collapsed in a heap. Clint swept the area with his eyes, looking for danger, then reached a hand out towards Coulson.

“You okay, boss?”

“Fine. Thanks for the assist,” he said, grabbing Clint’s hand and letting himself be hauled to his feet. Clint watched as Coulson holstered his gun, then brushed off his jacket and straightened his tie, all the while watching the mark for any movement.

“I couldn’t shoot him while you were fighting. You were moving around too much; I didn’t want to take the risk of hitting you,” Clint said. His eyes were also on the mark’s prone form.

“I appreciate that, Barton. I also appreciate the warning.” Coulson seemed to be about to say something else, but their comms crackled to life with Sitwell’s slightly shrill voice.
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"Barton! Phil? What the fuck is going on?"

Coulson raised a hand to his earpiece. *"We're secure here, Sitwell. Bring in the medical team and the clean-up crew."* Coulson dropped his hand from his ear and accepted the zip ties that Clint had fished from the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. "Cover me," he said. Unnecessarily, since Clint had already pointed his rifle at the man on the ground. Coulson knelt for a minute, "He's alive. Just." Coulson stepped back. Sitwell's teams were arriving, and at a nod from Coulson, the medics went to work.

Clint's eyes darted to the shipping container at the end of the row.

"Shall we go check it out?" Coulson asked.

"Yeah."

The container wasn't locked, and Coulson drew his gun again. Clint covered him as he pulled the door open, then relaxed when Coulson holstered his weapon. He stepped around the door to see a man lying on his back on the floor, rifle by his side, with half his face blown off.

"Sorry, boss. I only had a split-second when I saw his rifle barrel. It was the only shot I had."

Coulson looked at the hole in the wall of the shipping container. It was no more than three inches across, and Clint had put a bullet through it and into the other sniper's eye.

"Your shot saved my life," he said quietly, turning back toward Clint, who was still standing over the other sniper's corpse. "Thank you." Coulson held his gaze steadily for a moment.

Clint couldn't have looked away if he'd wanted to. How had he not noticed before now that Coulson had the most gorgeous eyes? "Uh, you're welcome." Clint wished there was something else he could say, something about loyalty and respect… and about Coulson having taught him what they meant. But Clint knew if he tried to find words for the complicated mess of what he was currently feeling, he'd sound like an idiot.

Coulson nodded. "I'll tell the clean-up crew they've got work to do in here."

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"This is some book you've written me, Cheese. Don't think I've ever seen a 376-B this thick before. Are you sure you're just asking for a bow and some exploding arrows, and not a flying car?" Fury waved the thick sheaf of documents before dropping it to his desk with a 'thud'.

"Barton wrote it."

"Excuse me?"

"The 376-B Request, Agent Barton wrote every word," Phil said, looking straight at a disbelieving Director Fury.
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“Sure he did, with just a little help from his handler,” Fury said, flipping through the pages and then reading from one: “Please see Attachment B: ‘Load restrictions of carbon-fiber uprights’ for further supporting evidence.”

“I helped him with the wording in places, yes. But he did all the research, and crunched all the numbers. He learned Auto-CAD so that he could show the engineering department exactly what he wanted.”

“That sounds just like your protégé, from what I’ve been reading in your reports.” Fury leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

“He’s not my…” Phil sighed, knowing full well that arguing with Fury was probably pointless. “He’s just a smart guy who had a rough start and never had the chance to prove himself before. He’s never had anything he could be proud of except his ability to shoot straight, and he’d started thinking that that was all he was good for, and all anybody cared about. Including us. I just want to give him the chance to be… whatever he can be.”

“Well, I can’t deny that he’s been doing exceptionally well. The bow he wants, are there real tactical advantages in the field? It’s not just bullshit because you want to give him a nice pat on the head?”

Phil refrained from giving his friend a dirty look because, okay, yes, that was a small part of it. A very, very small part.

“I’ve seen him shoot a bow. He’s phenomenal. It’s hard to believe without seeing it, but he is actually better with a bow than a gun. And tactically, yes; I do think there are situations in the field where a bow and arrows will serve better than a rifle.”

“Okay, Cheese, I’ll approve it. I’ll let you give him the good news, though.”

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Phil stood in the sporting goods store, at the rack of ‘Traditional and Reproduction’ bows. He looked at the small, graceful wood one that Barton had stroked when they’d been in the shop, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to replace something Barton had once had. Phil also didn’t want Barton to have any associations between him and Trickshot, the mentor who had lied to him and used him and left him for dead. Instead Phil chose the reproduction English longbow, the bow Barton had said he had always wanted to try.

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When Clint got back to his quarters that evening after a trip to the SHIELD outdoor range upstate, he found two things on his bunk. One was the top page of his 376-B Requisition, stamped ‘Approved’ and complete with Director Fury’s scrawling signature. Below the stamp and signature was a post-it note in Coulson’s neat handwriting that said, ‘Congratulations. You earned it.’ Next to the paperwork was the longbow he’d admired, complete with a traditional leather quiver full of arrows. There was a note on that, too. It read simply ‘Happy Birthday,’ and was signed simply ‘PC’.

Clint blinked at it. Today was the 17th, which meant… yeah. His birthday was tomorrow. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even celebrated his birthday, let alone gotten a gift. A gorgeous, expensive… Clint sat down on the bed next to the bow and looked from it to the 376-B form and back again. The requisition was approved, which meant he'd be getting not only a custom-made bow, but an archery lane at the range. So he'd be able to shoot his birthday present. Possibly even soon, because how long could it take to install a plexiglass wall and set up some foam padding… Clint knew his mind was spinning because he was having a hard time with the fact that Coulson… his boss… had bought him a birthday present. How did you say 'Thank you' for something like that? Clint had seen the bow's price tag in the store, and based on how much his own SHIELD salary was, he knew it wouldn't have made a huge dent in Coulson's take-home, but still… Sure, okay, he'd made a shot that saved Coulson's life a month ago. Coulson had thanked him at the time, and then not said another word about it. Clint had just been doing his job…

Clint shook his head. He wasn't going to straighten out his thoughts anytime soon, he knew that. He spent a long time looking at the bow, the quiver (which had a separate little pouch containing an extra string and a small tin of wax), and the arrows. Then he hung the bow and quiver up on the back of the door to his room. He opened his laptop and logged on.

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To: phillip.coulson@shield-internal.gov
From: clinton.barton@shield-internal.gov
Subject: bow

Thank you.
Clint
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One otherwise uneventful Friday morning, Phil logged onto his computer only to have an unexpected meeting reminder pop onto his screen. *'Meeting with C. Barton; Location: Range'*. Phil was quite sure the meeting hadn't been in his calendar yesterday; he always checked last thing before he went home. But he didn't have anything else scheduled, and if Barton wanted to show him something at the range… Phil poured himself a cup of coffee and drank half of it down quickly. He hadn't seen much of Barton in the past couple of weeks; they hadn't been out on a mission, and Barton had been busy with training and studying and all the other things he now did at SHIELD when there wasn't a mission in the works. Phil looked at his computer once more, trying vainly to tease more information out of the meeting request, and put his half-finished coffee down on his desk. He straightened his already perfect tie, shot his cuffs, and headed for the range.

"Hey boss, you're here! That's great. I didn't want to start without you. Figured you deserved to be here since you put so much work into making this happen." Barton was talking fast and smiling widely, gesturing with the bow in his hand.

With Barton were three people from R&D, all crammed into the last lane of the firing range, which had been converted to an archery range, as per the 376-B. Barton had a quiver full of arrows slung on his back. Phil recognized some of them as the ones they had bought at the sporting-goods store almost six months ago. The others were new, either bought by Barton or newly made by R&D, Phil didn't know.
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“So, the guys here have seen me do this before, we did some test runs up in their lab with the prototypes and so on, but I wanted you to be here for the first real test.” Barton was talking directly to Phil, his eyes bright. He acknowledged the other people present with a jab of his chin, but Phil felt the focus of his gaze. “Okay, so. Ready?”

Barton seemed to be waiting for his acknowledgement, or approval, or something, so Phil settled into a respectful ‘at ease’ stance, signaling with body language that Barton had his undivided attention.

“Go ahead,” Phil said, and nodded.

Barton nodded back, apparently satisfied. He settled his stance, and looked downrange at the target. Phil glanced at the target then his eyes went back to Barton, not wanting to miss an instant of this. As far as Phil could tell, the bow Barton held in his right hand was exactly the one he’d designed using the CAD program and described in his 376-B request form. It was sleek but functional, made of some sort of black compound, without any decoration or adornment. Barton handled it comfortably, settling himself at the shooting line with the same ease and confidence that Phil remembered from their evening of ‘research’ at the archery club. He pulled an arrow from the quiver on his back, nocked it on the string, drew, and aimed. Phil watched as Barton’s body stilled completely for the instant before he released the bowstring with a motion that was so smooth Phil almost missed it. He waited to see the smile curving Barton’s lips before glancing downrange.

The arrow was embedded in the center of the target. Of course it was.

“It’s off by 2 millimeters,” Barton said, turning his head slightly to the left where the R&D people were clustered. “Can’t tell yet if it’s the string or the limbs. Let’s see if we can find out.”

Phil felt a swell of pride as he watched Barton smoothly draw and fire 15 more arrows, this time arranging them in a circle where the red ring met the blue. Now Phil could see the discrepancy that Barton was talking about: the first three arrows were very slightly off to the blue side, but he had obviously started compensating after that. The rest of the arrows were, as far as Phil’s eyes could see, perfectly placed.

Barton fired his last shot and lowered the bow. There was a smattering of applause from the R&D people, and he gave an exaggerated showman’s bow. Then he turned to Phil, his eyes shining with happiness.

“Thank you, Coulson,” he said with a warm, impossibly wide smile.

Phil felt like he had been punched in the gut. The thought ‘I want him to smile at me like that again,’ ran through Phil’s head, putting him so off balance that he couldn’t even make himself say something about Barton having earned it. All he could say was, “You’re welcome.”

Barton’s shining eyes were on him for a moment more, and then he turned to the R&D cluster and started talking about draw weight and limb alignment and stabilizer threads. Phil watched for a minute, taking deep breaths until he found some equilibrium. Then he turned and left

quietly, not knowing that Barton had shot a glance at his back as he left, a small smile still on his face.

Chapter 3: The Third Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The Third Year

"It's broadcasting some kind of virus," Coulson said. "Anything with a computer chip is picking it up and going haywire."

"Yeah, I can see that." Clint watched an electronic billboard change from an ad for shoes to waves of static.

Clint was standing next to Coulson on a rooftop. He did that a lot these days. Being SHIELD's top sniper, he tended to get called in to shoot things, and Coulson almost always came with him. This time it was Coulson who'd been called out, as one of SHIELD's senior strategists, to see if he had any insight into the current situation. Which was a tank rolling up Lexington Avenue, shutting down every piece of electronic equipment in it's vicinity. The NYPD had got within three blocks with an armored SWAT vehicle before its onboard BIOS became infected and it stalled.

"The range seems to be three or four blocks. Recommend you authorize use of deadly force as soon as it gets within six blocks of the hospital," Coulson was saying to whoever was on the other end of his comms. *"Yes, well, tell people to evacuate, then."*

"Um, boss?"

"What is it, Barton?" Coulson sounded annoyed at being distracted.

"Permission to try something?"

Coulson glanced at him, his brow furrowing when he saw that Clint had an arrow nocked. An arrow that had a little blue glowing LED at the tip. Coulson seemed about to either argue or ask questions, but a noise from below made him turn just in time to see a low-flying news helicopter falling out of the sky near the tank, which accelerated to avoid impact. Towards the hospital.

"Goddam idiots," Coulson said tightly. "Permission granted."

Clint settled his stance and his breathing, sighted carefully, and fired. Nothing happened, except that the tank coughed to a halt.

"Is that confirmed? Good. I'm not sure yet, though Agent Barton had a hand in it," Coulson said over the comms, and looked at Clint sharply.

"EMP arrow," Clint said, trying but not really succeeding in keeping a straight face. "Something Sanjit in R&D came up with. Shuts down computers, apparently."

"Apparently," Coulson said drily, and turned back to survey the scene, where the NYPD SWAT team was now swarming over the tank.

Clint scanned the horizon. “I see they’ve topped out the Bloomberg tower,” he said after a minute's silence.

“Still using the high steel worker thing for your dating cover, then?”

“Yeah, it’s working out great. Well, in that it gives me something to say when I get asked what I do for a living. I dunno what I’m gonna do when I meet someone I really like, though. I mean so far it’s never gone past the third or fourth date. But if I get serious about someone, I’m gonna feel bad lying to them,” Clint said, still staring out at the horizon.

“There’s a SHIELD vetting procedure for significant others. When you get serious about someone, let me know and I’ll walk you through the paperwork,” Coulson said. His voice seemed a little tight, and Clint wondered if he was upset about the helicopter crash.

“Huh. Okay, thanks. Looks like they’ve got things under control here. You heading back to the office?”

“Yes.” Was it Clint’s imagination or was Coulson tense about something that didn’t seem to be the op?

“Cool. Is it okay if I tag along? I want your advice on how to word my after-action so that Sanjit gets a raise or at least a bonus out of this. He and his wife just had their third baby.”

“I thought she wasn’t due until next week?” Coulson asked as they took the stairs down from the roof, and then waited for an elevator.

“She wasn’t, but she went into labor early, apparently. She and the baby are fine, though.”

“How did you do in the pool?” Coulson seemed relaxed again now, and corner of his mouth was quirked into a tiny smile as he teased Clint about his participation in the ‘Guess the baby’s birthday’ office pool.

“I had tomorrow, so no luck.” Clint grinned, actually enjoying the gentle teasing from Coulson.

“Better luck next time. And since you’re going to be in my office anyway, we have a new mission to discuss.”

“Cool. Any chance I’ll get to use my bow?”

“Not much of one, sorry.”

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Phil finished typing his report and glanced over at where Barton was sitting in the corner of his office sofa, ankle resting on one knee with his laptop balanced precariously on his shin. It looked uncomfortable, but Phil knew that Barton was practically a contortionist, and the awkward position was the furthest thing from his mind as he rapidly tapped the keys. For a moment, Phil let himself think about how much he enjoyed Barton’s company. Just having him here, sharing space, working together. Phil had colleagues, and a few close friends, but it
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had been a long time since he'd let himself become… attached to someone the way he was to Clint Barton. He knew he had to guard against becoming too attached, because that would only lead to heartbreak. But having Barton as a friend, maybe even a close friend one day, was something Phil was actively looking forward to.

Barton stopped typing, and his brow furrowed as he concentrated, reading over his report.

"Hey boss, how do you spell 'recommendation'?"

"One 'c', two 'm's," Phil said, schooling his face carefully and keeping his eyes on his own screen. He didn't want Barton to catch him looking.

"Excellent, thanks." Barton hit one last key with a flourish, then put his laptop aside. "So, you said we had a new mission?"

Phil started to outline the mission and the plan, and watched with great satisfaction as Barton's eyes widened.

"Oh my god, boss. This is gonna be so much fun!"

"I'm glad you think so," Phil said in a flat, dry tone, but by now Barton knew his sense of humor well enough to laugh outright at him.

"Oh, come on, it's gonna be a blast and you know it. When do we leave?" Barton was bouncing excitedly on the sofa like a kid who had just been told he was going to Disney World.

"Not for ten days, at least. The Intelligence Division wants to do some more research and tracking, and they need to set up personnel rosters and so on."

"I thought it was going to be just the two of us?" Barton's good humor seemed a little dampened.

"On the mission, yes, but we'll have backup tracking the mark, in case he manages to give us the slip and we need help to pick him up again."

"Oh, we won't need that. He won't get away from us," Barton said with utmost confidence.

Phil secretly thought Barton was right, that the mark didn't stand much of a chance running from the two of them, but there was always a risk that someone with enough resources could pull an unexpected rabbit out of a hat.

Barton stood and stretched his back. "Oh, before I forget, here," he said, handing Phil a slightly crumpled piece of paper that he drew from the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. "I've already handed it in to HR, but I wanted to give you a copy just to be sure."

Phil looked down at the photocopy of the Change of Address form that Barton had just handed him. "You found a place off base?"

“Yeah. Figured it was time. It’s not much, just an old loft in East Harlem with sketchy plumbing and no elevator, but…” Barton trailed off and looked down, as if he was nervous about something. He shoved his hand into his pocket and Phil heard a jingling sound. “Um, if you wouldn’t mind,” Barton held out a set of keys, and Phil took them reflexively. “In case I lose mine, or for, um, emergencies or whatever.”

Phil closed his hand around the set of keys, touched by the gesture.

“Of course,” he said, not trusting himself to say anything else.

“You’re, uh, welcome. At my place, I mean, anytime. If you ever need somewhere to crash or anything. Like I mean if they’re spraying your building for roaches or something like that.” The tips of his ears went a little pink and he dropped his eyes to Phil’s desk.

“Thank you Barton, I’ll remember that,” Phil said.

“Cool. Okay, well, I’ve got to go buy some furniture, so I’ll see you later.” He sketched a wave and hustled out of Phil’s office. Phil uncurled his hand from around the set of keys Barton had given him. They were shiny and new, just cut, and on a small split ring without a fob. He should put them in the box in his desk drawer with his own spare set and Jasper’s. Instead he pulled his keyring out of his pocket and added the pair to it.

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Clint couldn’t help grinning a little as he lined up his target. This mission was the best ever, and he was having the time of his life.

“Ready when you are boss,” Clint said.

“You’re completely sure?” Coulson asked, and for once, Clint didn’t get mad at someone for asking. After all, Coulson’s head was under the figurative apple this time.

“One hundred percent, boss. You might not even get wet.”

“Abort if anything goes off script.” There wasn’t a hint of nerves or reproach in Coulson’s voice, just a gentle reminder.

“I promise not to take the chance of anyone getting hurt,” Clint said, and since Coulson was literally in the firing line, he absolutely meant it.

“Okay, here we go.” Clint watched through his scope as Coulson, dressed as a waiter and carrying a pitcher of water, approached the head table. Clint saw Coulson’s mouth shape the words ‘Water, sir?’ and saw the mark lean to the side a little to give the ‘waiter’ space. Coulson reached out with the jug and Clint fired. The jug shattered, spraying water and a few shards of plastic. Pandemonium broke out, and Clint looked carefully for any signs of blood from Coulson or anyone near him. Coulson went down, covering his head, but not before giving a finger waggle that was the ‘I’m okay’ signal. Clint hummed softly to himself as he packed up his rifle. It would be at least an hour before Coulson got back to the safe-house, plenty of time for him to start cooking dinner.
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Phil arrived back at the safe-house tired and a little achy. In the chaos after Barton's shot, he'd been kicked in the ribs and shins by the stampede of fleeing socialites. Then he'd had to slip away from the police who were investigating the shooting, which wasn't difficult for a man of his skills, but it meant he'd had to crouch behind a stack of tablecloths for twenty minutes until the coast was clear. He knees were still screaming at him for that one.

He opened the door to the apartment with his passkey, and was greeted by the most delicious aroma of… some sort of beef stew, he guessed. He took an appreciative sniff and his lips curled into a small smile at the knowledge that Barton had cooked for him. For them, of course, but he knew damn well that when Barton was working alone, he ordered pizza. He only cooked like this when they were on an op together and ended up in a safe-house with decent kitchen facilities. And if Phil arranged for that to happen as often as possible, well, that was between him and his better angels.

"Hey boss, I was beginning to wonder if the cops had dragged you down to the station to give a witness statement or something." Barton came into the apartment's small living room wearing low-slung jeans, a faded purple t-shirt and a wide grin. He had a dishtowel thrown over one shoulder and a smudge of tomato sauce at the corner of his mouth.

"No, it just took me a while to duck them. Is, ah, whatever your cooking still okay?" Phil would hate to think that the dinner Barton had cooked was ruined.

"Nah, it's fine. I knew you might be a while so I did a boeuf bourguignon. It can simmer for ages and still be good."

Phil carefully didn't remark on Barton's pronunciation; 'boeuf bourguignon' had come out as 'beef boar-ging-nan'. "It smells fantastic," he said truthfully.

Barton ducked his head. He'd finally stopped going stiff and turning away when Phil praised either his cooking or his performance in the field, but he still wasn't used to being complimented. Phil was working on changing that.

"Go change out of those shoes," Barton said as he headed back into the kitchen, "I need five minutes to plate everything up."

"I'm fine, I can help," Phil said, following him into the kitchen.

"No, shoo! I've waited tables. I know it does a number on your feet even if you're in shape. And it looked like you got kicked a couple of times in the panic. Anything serious?" Barton's eyes went soft with concern, and Phil looked away.

"Nothing gets by you, does it Hawkeye? Just a couple of bruised ribs. I'll be fine."

Barton crossed his arms and stared at him.

"Okay, I'll go change. And thank you for cooking," Phil said, letting the rich sincerity come through in his voice and his eyes.
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Barton shrugged and blushed a tiny bit. “It’s fine. Now that I have my own place, I practice sometimes, but cooking for just one person gets old. It’s nice to have… y’know.” Barton turned away at that and fiddled with something on the stove. Phil took his cue and went to change.

A few minutes later he was back, wearing chinos, a blue button down over a black t-shirt, and loafers. He looked at a table that held two steaming plates of boeuf bourguignon with roast potatoes and broccoli. There was also a basket of rolls and a bowl of salad. And two glasses of red wine.

“We’re on duty, Barton,” Phil said with a significant look at the wine.

“Oh, come on, boss. It’s just one glass each. The other half of the bottle is in the stew, and it seemed a waste to pour what was left over down the drain. Besides, we aren’t heading back out tonight, are we?”

“God, I hope not,” Phil said, pulling out his chair and sitting down. “Thank you, Clint, this all looks wonderful.” Then quickly, before either of them could make anything of the fact that he’d just used Barton’s first name, he picked up his wineglass. “To a successful mission.”

Barton gave him a long look before raising his own glass and tapping it lightly against Phil’s.

“Well, go ahead, don’t just stare at it. Eat.”

Phil smiled and picked up his fork. And made a loud, appreciative noise as he tried his first bite of stew. “You’ve outdone yourself, Barton. Truly. I should tell Fury to give you a raise to make sure you don’t run off to become a chef.” Phil said it with a grin to dampen the sincerity of the compliment, but Barton ducked his head again and blushed a little anyway.

“Glad you like it,” he mumbled, and started to eat. “So,” he said after they’d both had a few bites, “I guess we still don’t know what he’s going to do next?”

“No, I wasn’t able to stay close enough to him to find out who he was calling or where he was going. We’ll have to trust the backup team to stay on his tail.”

The op was a fascinating one. The mark had done a significant amount of business with what turned out to be an AIM front, and as a result had information that could be very helpful to SHIELD. The problem was that the mark refused to roll over on his former associates. SHIELD had tried bribery, threats, and appeals to patriotism, but nothing had worked. So Nick Fury and Phil Coulson had hatched this particularly devious plan: to make the mark believe he was the target of an assassination.

Enter Clint Barton, World’s Greatest Marksman. Barton’s job was to shoot at the man, but to miss very convincingly, like he had earlier today. Phil had been a little worried when he first outlined the plan to Barton that the sniper would think it a misuse of his skills, but Barton had grinned and laughed and said that it ‘sounded like fun’.

And he did seem to be enjoying himself. They’d worked for three days setting up the trick with the waiter and the water jug, to the extent of buying a dozen identical jugs and

practicing at a disused quarry upstate for a few hours the previous afternoon.

The plan from here was to follow the mark wherever he went, and 'miss' a couple more times, then have a SHIELD Agent show up and foil the next assassination attempt in order to gain the mark's trust. Phil was 95% sure it was going to work.

They finished eating, and Phil leaned back and just barely managed to refrain from patting his stomach. Instead, he pushed himself to his feet, hiding a wince as his bruised shins protested, and gathered the dishes.

"Hey, you don't have to wash up, not after having been on your feet all afternoon," Barton said, following with an armload of leftovers.

"You cooked. I'll wash up." Phil said, reiterating the rule they always followed.

"Fine. You wash, I'll dry," Barton said, grabbing a dishtowel and standing next to Phil at the sink.

Phil suppressed the smile that would have let on just how much this small pocket of domesticity meant to him. The SHIELD safe-house had a cleaning staff that would come in once they'd left. Beyond loading the dishwasher, so that they'd have enough plates for tomorrow's breakfast, they didn't actually have to wash up at all. But Phil enjoyed standing next to Barton, working together seamlessly in the kitchen the way they were starting to in the field.

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Three days later, Clint was cooking for Coulson again, if you counted heating up MREs as cooking, which Clint didn't. But Coulson was the one who knew how to set up the space-aged two-man tent and the rest of the equipment, and Clint felt like he'd be in the way if he tried to help, so he 'made dinner' while Coulson set up camp.

"I'm, ah, just going to change into some dry clothes. You should do the same," Coulson said, disappearing into the tent. As he pulled a t-shirt and cargo pants out of his pack, Clint thought it was kinda strange that Coulson would bother changing in the tent. Surely it was easier just to strip down like he was currently doing on this deserted bit of rocky beach. Out of respect for Coulson's feelings, rather than his own modesty, Clint turned around so that his ass, instead of his junk, was facing the tent door. Clint was used to changing in the bustle of 'backstage' at the circus, with all sorts of people coming and going, so he had no shyness to speak of. But Coulson had been in the Army, surely he was used to changing around other people too? Clint shrugged as he fastened his pants. Thinking about it, he'd never seen Coulson anything but fully dressed, which, considering the amount of time they'd spent staying in safe-houses together… Coulson must have some sort of hang-up about it, Clint realized, then put it out of his mind. He had much more important things to think about that Coulson's modesty issues.

Like how he was going to get another shot at the mark. Clint's thoughts were interrupted, however, by Coulson emerging from the tent, dressed in SHIELD's version of fatigues. Clint
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looked him up and down quickly, wondering briefly again about the modesty thing before saying, “There’s hot food. Figured we’d need it after the swim.”

“Good thinking, Barton, thanks.” Coulson sank into a soldier’s squat and accepted one of the foil packets.

“Any ideas about how we set up the shot?” Barton asked after he’d had a few mouthfuls of what was apparently supposed to be beef brisket.

“No, not until we go take a close-up look at the compound. If our intelligence is correct, and it should be, he’s got some top-notch guards; so it should be interesting.”

Clint knew Coulson well enough by now to know that ‘interesting’ in this case meant ‘challenging, but not impossible, and possibly even fun.’

“But we need to get some sleep first. We’ll head across the island late this afternoon and do a full reconnoitre.”

They had dropped out of a Quinjet into the water two miles offshore an hour before dawn, and had used dive scooters to get to the island. Which Clint had been pleased about, not only because the dive scooters were ‘cool James Bond toys,’ but also because even though he’d been keeping up his swimming in the SHIELD pool, he would not have enjoyed a two-mile open-ocean swim towing all their gear.

They finished up the food and climbed into the tent. It was small. Tiny, in fact. Clint found himself being very glad that he and Coulson were both small men, and even then he briefly wondered if sleeping head-to-toe would work better, as there didn’t seem to be quite enough room for both of their shoulders across the width of the tent. But after a little adjusting during which no one got elbowed in the eye, they settled down. Clint didn’t think he’d be able to fall asleep, he was too keyed up from the mission, but next to him, Coulson, with his soldier’s ability to sleep anytime, anywhere, dropped right off. It gave Clint the chance to turn his head and look at his handler in a way he’d never allowed himself to before.

Coulson’s face was soft and lax in sleep. It made him look younger, even though his hair was starting to go gray at the sideburns and temples. He had a round head and nicely-shaped ears. Clint had never thought that about anyone’s ears before, but he currently had a close-up view. He spent a while studying Coulson’s crooked nose. He’d obviously broken it at some point, somewhere that setting it straight again hadn’t been a top priority. His cheeks and jaw were faintly stubbly, and Clint could see a few grey hairs scattered among the brown ones there too. His lips were thin and pink and smooth-looking. Clint’s tongue snaked out and licked his own, then he turned his head back so that he was looking up at the roof of the tent. He couldn’t let himself think about Coulson in a way that wasn’t strictly professional, no matter how much he might want to. Coulson wasn’t interested in Clint, he’d made that perfectly clear. Besides, Clint was starting to think that they had a chance at becoming real friends, maybe even close friends, and he didn’t want to risk fucking that up.

Clint sighed a small, very quiet sigh, and closed his eyes. He listened to Coulson’s breathing, loud in the tiny tent. If someone had told him five years ago, that this is where he’d be, he would have laughed in their face. Five years ago he was on the wrong side of the law, on the

run, and didn't expect to make it to his next birthday. Now here he was, doing work that was… well, good. Important, even. With a man who was every bit as upstanding as his as his comic-book hero. But it wasn't just about toeing the line, for Coulson. If that was all there was to the man, Clint wouldn't respect him the way he did. Doing the right thing, and doing your job to the best of your ability was about self-respect and personal honor to Coulson. Clint knew he wasn't a good man, and he'd never be an honorable one. But he could work on earning Coulson's respect. And if he did, then maybe he could respect himself, too, just a little.

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Coulson held up a fist in the silent signal for 'stop' and Clint froze. They'd been creeping through the jungle for almost two hours, making a complete circuit of the mark's compound to assess the security and look for the best way for Clint to make his shot. He looked around, moving just his eyes, and spotted what had made Coulson stop. A sentry on the roof of what was probably the mansion's pool house, judging by its proximity to an expanse of bright blue tiles. That made the sixth guard they'd seen so far, and there were sure to be more in the house.

Coulson crooked a finger and Clint leaned in, putting his good ear close to Coulson's lips.

"I want to get a better look, but we'll need to belly-crawl."

Clint nodded. The next 15 minutes involved following Coulson through the underbrush; being astonished, again, at how the man managed to move almost completely silently and trying to do the same; while getting mud down his pants and trying to avoid getting poked in the eye with a branch. But when Coulson signalled a halt they were only 20 yards from the perimeter fence, and had a clear view of the pool area and back deck of the house. And of the sentry, who was methodically turning in a slow 180-degree arc, sweeping the forest. As he turned towards them. Coulson stiffened. Once the sentry had swung past them, Coulson signaled and they began to inch back they way they'd come.

Back at camp, Coulson was quiet and thoughtful. Clint uncapped a canteen and offered it to him. Coulson accepted distractedly and drank, then handed it back and said, "Thanks," seeming to finally come back from being lost in his thoughts.

"So what was the deal with the sentry on the pool-house roof?" Clint asked while he pulled out a couple of MREs and started them heating.

Coulson was quiet for a moment, and Clint wasn't sure he was going to get an answer.

"I know him." Coulson said. "Knew him, in the Army. His name is King. We were in Afghanistan together. He's good. If that's the caliber of guard our mark has hired, we need to plan this very carefully."

Clint was surprised. Coulson always planned everything carefully, so if he felt the need to explicitly mention it now, well, that meant this one was going to be tricky. He handed Coulson his food, and they both ate in silence. Once Coulson had finished his peanut butter crackers and they were both sipping bad instant coffee, Clint offered to share his Skittles.
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“Thanks,” Coulson said, accepting a half-dozen. “So, what did you see?” Coulson asked. It was clear to Clint that they were now discussing openings and possible avenues of attack.

They talked about it for hours. Throwing out ideas, discarding some, examining others at great length. Picking things apart, running down every ‘what if’ and ‘in the worst case’ they could think of. It had been dusk when they got back from their recon and now it was full dark. They couldn’t risk a fire or even a small lantern, but there was a three-quarter full moon so they could easily see each others hand gestures and facial expressions.

“It all comes down to getting away after I take the shot without getting caught,” Clint said as they discarded another possible plan. Coulson nodded in agreement. “So I still think I should take the shot from as far away as I can manage, to give me a head-start on getting back here.”

“Us,” said Coulson. “Wherever you are, I’m going to be there for backup.”

“Yeah, okay. How are you at climbing trees?” There was a joke in his voice as he asked, but Clint figured that Coulson was probably an expert tree-climber, considering how good the man was at everything else he did.

“You’re sure that a tall tree is your best angle?” Coulson asked.

“It’s not my best angle,” Clint said. “But it’s the furthest spot from the compound that I can get a shot from.”

“And you’re sure… sorry. I know you wouldn’t suggest it if you weren’t sure,” Coulson said, shaking his head a little in what Clint figured was exasperation. Clint understood the feeling. They’d been talking around this for two hours, and neither of them were completely comfortable with the best plan they’d come up with.

“Well in this case,” Clint said, “I’m gonna want to go up and check, first. I mean I think the angles are right, but it’s kinda hard to judge from the ground in the middle of a forest.”

“Okay, so tomorrow we go back and check. And if you can get the shot from that tree, that’s what we do.” Coulson sounded more comfortable with the plan now.

“The thing is, though, that I’m gonna have to wait for him to be in the right spot in that room for a couple of seconds; and he might not do that tomorrow, or the day after.”

“We’re not on a tight timeline for this op. We have two weeks’ worth of MREs and water purification tablets. We can start working on a Plan B after four or five days, though,” Coulson added when Clint made a face at the thought of eating MREs for two weeks.

There was a time when food was food, Clint thought, and two weeks of MREs would have been heaven. He was spoiled, now with the SHIELD cafeteria and his little apartment kitchen with a fully stocked fridge and cupboards.

“It’s fine, boss. I’ll get the job done.”

“I know you will,” Coulson said, and the quiet confidence that Clint could hear in his voice made him swell with pride.

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Clint sat in the tree until it was too dark to see, even with the light spilling out of the den-like room he was watching. There had been no movement for the past two hours, and now he wouldn't be 100% certain that anyone who walked in was his mark, rather than a staff member or bodyguard. He made a soft owl-call twice, then began to climb down. Coulson met him at the bottom, sidearm at the ready, and they both stood silently for five minutes, Clint stretching his legs and spine, and Coulson watching and listening for any sign that they'd been heard. Coulson made the signal for 'move out,' and they headed back to camp, taking a different route that the one they'd come by to avoid leaving an obvious trail.

Back at their campsite, they retrieved their packs and tent from where they'd hidden them in a pile of rocks near the beach - once Clint was able to take the shot, they were heading straight out to the extraction point, so their gear had to be packed and ready. When meant they needed to unpack it all again every night. Coulson set up the tent as usual, and Clint started to fumble with the pack that contained their food.

"Leave that, Barton. I'll do supper. Here." Coulson tossed Clint an energy bar.

"M'okay," Clint mumbled around a bite of something that claimed to have both peanut butter and chocolate in it, but in fact tasted more like Whoppers that someone had already sucked most of the chocolate off.

"You're tired. It's fine. I know what it's like to be on alert like that for hours. Relax," Coulson said.

"Thanks." Clint lay back with his head propped up on his pack and closed his eyes. He'd been pretty confident about this plan three days ago, but now he was starting to have his doubts. He heard Coulson sit down next to him and rip open the MRE packaging.

"Maybe we should talk about Plan B," Clint said quietly, eyes still closed.

"Certainly," Coulson said. "If sitting up in that tree is starting to be too much of a strain-"

"It's not that." Clint opened his eyes and turned his head. "I'm fine. I can sit up there for a week if I have to, I've done it before."

Coulson was quiet, giving him time to marshal his thoughts and continue.

"I just… I don't want to… Maybe there's a better way."

"I don't believe there is." Coulson's voice was calm and even. "Everything else we thought of had a larger risk of confrontation with the bodyguards."

"Yeah." Clint blew out a breath. "I just… You don't have to hang around at the bottom of the tree waiting for me."

"Yes, I do. And I'm not waiting for you. I'm watching your back."

"It's just… it could still take days."
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“Then it takes days. That’s the way missions go sometimes. It’s not a problem, Barton.” Coulson said the last bit gently, and the tension Clint had been feeling eased.

“Yeah, okay. What’s supper, then?”

Later, next to each other in the tiny tent, Clint lay still, waiting for Coulson to drop off. After three days of sleeping next to each other like this, he’d learned to tell the moment Coulson fell asleep from the small shift in his breathing.

“Are you worried about making the shot?” Coulson asked quietly into the darkness.

“No. I’m more worried about what happens if the bodyguards catch us.”

Their brief was to avoid killing or injuring civilians at all costs, and in this instance the mark’s bodyguards counted as civilians. Yes, they were professionals, but they had been hired to do a legal job by a reasonably honest man. Shooting one of them because they had tried to defend their boss against assassination was not in the game plan. Allowing themselves to be captured, if necessary, was. If worst came to worst SHIELD would send an extraction team to rescue them. But that wasn’t really what Clint was worried about either.

“If it came down to it,” Clint asked, turning his head to look at Coulson’s profile, “Would you really let one of them shoot you?”

“Yes,” Coulson said. He didn’t move or even open his eyes.

“Even though we’re just trying to get information out of this guy? I mean, it’s not as if he’s a murderer or a drug dealer or a HYDRA agent or anything.”

“The information he has could stop a terrorist attack. It could save hundreds or thousands of lives.”

“But you don’t know that, for sure.” Clint could feel Coulson’s shrug in the darkness.

“I’ve put my life on the line for less.”

Clint was quiet. He waited for Coulson to ask him, to demand some sort of assurance that Clint too, would die for the cause if it came down to that, but there was only silence in the dark. Clint was glad Coulson didn’t ask, because he honestly didn’t know if he would be able lay down his life for the greater good. What he did know, and couldn’t say, was that he wouldn’t be able to stand by and watch Coulson get shot. No matter how good the cause…

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Barton had made the shot. He’d gotten out of the tree. They’d made it back to the site of their base camp, signaled for extraction, and dumped their non-essential gear (the tent, sleeping bags, and extra food). They had waded out into the ocean until their heads were barely above water.

“Stay with me. Whatever you do, don’t lose contact.”
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“Got it, boss.”

“I mean it Barton.” Phil didn’t know why he suddenly felt apprehensive about this phase of the mission, when everything had gone well up until now, but he trusted his instincts and he wasn’t willing to take any risks.

“Not gonna lose you, I promise.”

“Okay, then, let’s do this.” Phil engaged his dive scooter and his GPS.

He didn’t breath easily again until they were both sitting, dripping, on the Quinjet that had rendezvoused with them at the specified coordinates and winched them out of the ocean.

Phil accepted a cup of coffee from the Quinjet’s co-pilot. So did Barton. Once the man had gone back to the cockpit, Phil rolled his head to one side to look at Barton.

“What?” Barton asked after a minute.

“Good work,” Phil said.

“Thanks,” Barton said with a smile. It wasn’t his usual cocky grin. It wasn’t a sardonic smile, or a fake one hiding something. It was a true, warm, smile of appreciation. It lit up Barton’s face, and Phil couldn’t help but smile back. “You’re welcome,” he said. Then in an attempt to cover how ridiculously happy he felt all of a sudden, just because Barton had smiled at him, Phil took a sip of his coffee and made a face.

“I guess all they’ve got is MREs,” Barton said philosophically.

“I’ll buy you a real cup of coffee as soon as we get back to base,” Phil said without thinking.

“Sounds good, boss,” said Barton, and his smile got even wider.

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“I’ve heard people say that British food is terrible, but this is great,” Clint said after he’d swallowed a bite of his burger.

“Don’t believe everything you hear in old movies,” Jasper said around a mouthful of fish & chips. Coulson just hummed in agreement as he lifted another forkful of something called 'chicken tikka masala' to his mouth.

“So what’s the plan from here?”

“Well,” Jasper said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin, “He hasn’t left the apartment since he got here three days ago. Curtains are always drawn, security in the building, at all the exits, and on the roof. He has a meeting he can’t miss the day after tomorrow, which is why he came to London in the first place. That’s our best bet, but it’s going to be tricky to set up.”

Coulson took a sip of the rich amber ale in his glass. Clint wasn’t sure if Coulson was unbending a little on his ‘no booze while on duty’ rule, considering that they’d technically
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been on duty for over three weeks straight, or if it was just that three guys eating lunch in a pub in London without drinks would have looked suspicious. Sitwell had a glass of a pale beer called 'Fosters' in front of him, but no one had said anything when Clint had ordered a coke to go with his burger.

"On his way back to the flat," Coulson said, "after his meeting is our most likely window, unless we manage to find out where the meeting is and can set something up there."

"I like the apartment, uh, flat," Clint said. "The sight lines to the front door are good and there's a building two blocks back that looks perfect, assuming I can get up onto the roof. It'll need split-second timing, though."

"Shouldn't be a problem, not with full backup and everyone on comms."

"Just find something other than me to put a hole through to make it convincing," Sitwell said.

"What's wrong, Sitwell? Not willing to take one for the team?" Clint asked around the fries he'd just stuffed into his mouth. Since they arrived in London and met up with the rest of the personnel assigned to the op, Clint had heard through the grapevine that the last shot he'd made—grazing the mark's shoulder from almost 2000 meters—had earned him some attention.

"If you want to show off, you can use someone else for target practice," Sitwell said, draining the last of his beer. "Are we coordinating this with the locals? You know how touchy they are about guns here."

"About half as touchy as they are about us pulling an op without telling them. I have a meeting set up with an old contact this afternoon. She'll tell me what the best channels are."

"Right, so you handle the making nice, I'm on this guy's tail when he moves, and Barton sets up his shot. Seems simple enough." Sitwell finished his beer and burped.

"How're you going to get close enough to the mark to play hero?" Clint asked. "If he's surrounded by bodyguards?"

"I can handle my part of the mission, Barton." Sitwell seemed annoyed at him for asking, and Clint remembered that not all handlers worked the way Coulson did.

"Jasper, it's a fair question. The way Barton and I have been working this op so far, we go over every angle and every contingency together, just to be sure there are no holes." Coulson was using the mild tone that Clint had come to understand meant 'Don't piss me off,' and he felt a wave of gratitude towards his handler for treating him like an equal in front of Sitwell.

"A couple of my juniors are going to arrange a distraction. As soon as you're ready to take the shot, you tell them so on the comms, they distract the bodyguards, and I go in."

Clint nodded.

"Anything else?" Sitwell still looked a little miffed, but kept his tone even.

Clint shook his head.

“I’ll be in touch if we get any new intel.”

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From his vantage point on the roof of a nearby building, Clint could see Sitwell hiding behind a dumpster in the alley next to the mark’s building. He could also see the two junior agents who were posing as a couple making out against the side of a car nearby. He had the apartment door in his sights. This one was going to be the easiest so far, because he didn’t have to be accurate, just fast. The window would shatter dramatically no matter where he hit it. But he was calling the shots; they would go on his word, and that made him both proud and nervous.

“The car is coming now,” Coulson said over the comms, and Clint waited for Sitwell and the junior agent to acknowledge before saying, *“Roger, I see it.”* He breathed in and out slowly and evenly. He watched the car approach, trying to pick out the figures through the tinted glass. His eyes flicked to the side. Sitwell, check. Juniors, check.

“I’m going unless I get an abort,” Clint said, keeping his voice low even though he was on a rooftop two blocks away.

“Roger that,” said Coulson. *“We’re go on Hawkeye’s word. Backup teams, check in.”*

Clint heard but didn’t register as the medical team, the clean-up team and the emergency extraction team checked in with Coulson. His focus was on the car as it pulled to a stop, double-parked outside the mark’s apartment. Flat. Whatever. A bodyguard got out and headed up the steps to unlock the door. Good protocol; they were going to have mere seconds to make this work. The second bodyguard got out and took position near the hood of the car. The mark came out, followed immediately by the third bodyguard. Clint waited until they were both on the sidewalk. Pavement. Whatever.

“Romeo and Juliette go. Sitwell go,” Clint said. One of the junior agents screamed an ear-splitting high-pitched scream. The bodyguards looked towards where the two ‘lovers’ were now having a drag-out fight. Sitwell was sprinting toward the mark. Clint watched as Sitwell yelled “Get down,” and hit the mark in a flying tackle. Clint fired, smashing the window beside the front door of the building.

“Romeo and Juliet get out. Backup, wait for Sitwell’s signal. Hawkeye, you’re clear. Meet back at the safe-house.” Coulson’s clear, calm voice came through Clint’s earpiece.

Clint watched until Sitwell had ushered the mark into the building and closed the door behind them, then he broke his rifle down and stowed it.

“We had information about another attempt on your life.” Clint heard Sitwell saying to the mark. *“We can protect you from here on in, if you’ll let us.”*

There was a long stream of swearing in a mixture of Greek and English, most of it aimed at the bodyguards.
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"Yes, okay. These malakas obviously can't do the job properly. You'll want information in exchange for this protection, of course. Since one of my former associates is obviously trying to silence me, I suppose that means I should tell you everything."

That sounded like success to Clint, so he switched his comms from 'operation wide' to Coulson's channel, wincing when his integrated hearing aid gave a little burst of static as he did. They'd probably be ordering pizza for the debrief, Clint thought as he climbed down the fire escape from the roof. The cheese here was really good, and you could even get that chicken tikka stuff that Coulson liked so much on a pizza. Maybe he'd try it…

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"…in briefing room 7A at oh-nine-hundred sharp on Monday."

"Got it boss. Anything else?"

"No. Except… Clint, are you busy on Sunday?"

"This Sunday? No, I, uh, was supposed to have a date, but the guy cancelled on me."

"I'm sorry," Coulson said, sounding sincere. That sent a tiny pang through Clint. It was nice having a friend who cared when you got dumped, but Clint still sometimes wished that Coulson was interested in more than just being friends. And that sounded juvenile, even in his head. He shrugged. "No biggie, it wasn't really going anywhere. The sex was pretty good, but we didn't have much of anything else in common, so…" Clint broke off as he realized that he was already far into TMI territory. "Uh, why'd you ask?"

"Jasper and I are watching the Super Bowl at my place. I'd like you to come too."

"You watch football?" It was out of Clint's mouth before he had a chance to think.

"Jasper and I have a kind of a tradition of getting together to watch at least one major sporting event a year, sometimes it's the Super Bowl, sometimes the World Series, or the NBA finals. It depends on when we're both off mission. One year we had to made do with the PGA final. Jasper fell asleep halfway through."

"Uh, okay, but if it's a thing you and, uh, Sitwell do, then why're you inviting me?"

"Because I'd like to think we're friends," Coulson said.

"Uh, yeah. Sure we are. Friends I mean. Well, if you're sure it's okay with Sitwell. I mean - " Clint knew he sounded like a complete idiot and snapped his mouth shut.

"I mentioned it to Jasper and he's fine with it. Show up on Sunday any time after five. Kick-off is at 6:40, but the all pregame stuff is fun to watch." Coulson smiled at him.

"Um, okay. Sure. Thanks. Should I bring anything?"

"Nah, don't worry about that. I'll get in some chips and hot dogs, and stock the fridge with beer."
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“Okay. I, uh, I guess I’ll see you Sunday, then.” Clint didn’t understand exactly what was going on, but he was willing to go with it and see what happened.

Coulson nodded the sharp little nod he used in the field, and Clint took it as a dismissal and left.

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“Uh, hi, could you grab this? I think I’m about to drop it.” Clint shoved the crock-pot into Coulson’s arms.

“What’s this?”

“Chili. For the chili-dogs. Is it okay if I put this in the fridge? The cream cheese gets kinda runny if it gets too warm.” Clint had walked into Coulson’s kitchen and was putting grocery bags on the counter and a large dish into the fridge.

“Clint, you didn’t need to bring food.” Coulson set the crock-pot full of chili on the counter, and plugged it in without being told to.

“I know, but what’s a Super Bowl party without chili-dogs and tortilla chips with seven-layer dip?”

“Seven-layer dip?”

“It’s awesome. It’s got salsa and guacamole and three kinds of cheese. Sue in accounting made it for Tim’s kid’s baby shower last month, and I got the recipe from her. Well it’s not really a recipe, since you don’t cook it, but anyway, wait ‘till you try it. Here’s the chips for it, I’ll just put them here for now, okay? Is Sitwell here?” Clint finally ground to a halt.

“He’s here and and he’s looking forward to the seven-layer dip!” came a voice from the living room, and Clint grinned at Coulson. Coulson gave him a small smile back and reached past him into the fridge.

“Here, Jasper brought the beer.”

“Well, see, then I did right bringing food. I’m getting all civilized and stuff!”

“Thank you for cooking, Clint,” Coulson said, with the same rich sincerity he always used when Clint cooked for them on a mission.

“No problem, boss!” Coulson had been calling him Clint since he arrived, he realized, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to call Coulson ‘Phil’. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if he was welcome to.

“Get in here you guys, you’re missing the highlights reel!” Sitwell called from the living room.

Two hours later they’d each had a couple of beers and a couple of chili-dogs and between them had demolished most of the seven-layer dip.
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The game had paused between ends, and the network was stuffing as many expensive ads into the break as they could. One, which featured an animated ferret who was apparently psychic, had Clint laughing so hard he had to but his beer down for fear of spilling it. Coulson next to him and Sitwell on the other side were chucking along, partly at the commercial and partly at Clint's reaction. Clint slapped his now empty hand down on Coulson's thigh and gave it a squeeze as he continued to guffaw loudly at the ferret's antics.

So it took him a second to realize that Coulson had gone silent and stiff beside him.

"Get your hand off my leg," Coulson said in a clipped tone, his voice tight.

"Don't worry boss, I'm not trying to cop a feel or anything, honest," Clint said, and gave Coulson's leg another little squeeze.

"Get. It. Off." Coulson's voice was loud and sharp, and his face had turned red. Clint snatched his hand away as if he'd been burned.

"Sorry, Coulson-" But he didn't finish the sentence because Coulson had stood abruptly as was striding into the kitchen. "What the…" Clint made to get up and follow, but Sitwell grabbed his arm.

"Clint, stay here."

"What the fuck did I do?"

"You touched him in a way that made him uncomfortable." Sitwell was tugging on Clint's arm, trying to get him to sit back down.

"Fuck, I wasn't coming on to him. He's gotta know that."

"He does. That's not what bothered him. Sit down."

"Then why?" Clint sat.

Jasper took off his glasses and rubbed his hand over his face. "All I can tell you is that something happened to Phil on a mission, years ago when he was a field agent, and he's got… issues."

"Shit, like a PTSD thing, you mean?" Clint was surprised. Coulson had always seemed so confident and in control.

"Something like that."

"Then I should go apologize," Clint said, trying to get to his feet again. Sitwell yanked him back down.

"Don't. Leave him be."

"But-"

“Clint, he’s embarrassed about his reaction to you touching him.”

“But why should he be embarrassed? If something happened on a mission, then it’s not his fault.” Clint felt terrible and wanted Coulson to know that he was sorry. That he’d be really careful to never do it again. That Coulson could trust him.

“How do you feel when someone mentions that you never got past the fifth grade? After all, it wasn’t your fault that your folks died and your brother dragged you off to the circus.”

Clint could feel the tips of his ears burning. “Yeah, okay. I get it. Fuck, that sucks.” Clint sucked in a breath and finally relaxed back into the sofa cushions. Then he had a horrible thought. “He, uh, didn’t get tortured or, uh, anything like that, did he?”

“Clint, I can’t tell you anything else; it would violate his privacy.”

Clint blew out a breath. “Yeah, I get that. I just… It’d be good to know what else not to do, or say, y’know?”

“Don’t touch him unless he tells you to, or you need to to save his life. And don’t mention it. Ever. Not even to apologize. He’d rather you just forget anything ever happened. Believe me.”

Clint nodded. He understood wanting to forget about bad things that had happened to you. He also understood not wanting someone, even a friend, to bring up sensitive topics. “Okay, yeah. I won’t say anything. Promise.”

And true to his word, five minutes later when Coulson came back into the room and sat back down on the sofa between them without a word, Clint pretended that nothing had happened.

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“The current schedule has us leaving five days from now,” Phil said, not needing to glance at the folder full of extensive notes on the table in front of him. “Any questions?” He looked around at the assembled agents and saw six serious faces. He forced himself not to linger on Barton’s any longer than the others.

“Why are we waiting that long?” asked Agent Tyrone Booker, the team’s explosives expert. Chomping at the bit for action, as usual. Phil wondered, not for the first time, how a man could be so patient and meticulous when diffusing bombs, but hot-headed and eager about everything else. “Surely if we’re rescuing this captive scientist, every day counts?”

“Every day does count. Every minute counts, but unfortunately we haven’t discovered the precise location where she’s being held yet. SHIELD intelligence is following up on several reports of a compound deep in the jungle, but so far our satellite imaging hasn’t been able to penetrate the dense canopy, so we’re having to rely on scouts on the ground. Also I want to take this team through some supplementary training before we ship out. This is a highly complex and dangerous mission. I need each one of you to be absolutely ready.”
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This time Phil tried not to single out the scientist at the table, Agent Anskia Jankovic, a biochemist. They needed someone who could identify the biochemical research and tell them how to either transport or destroy it safely. SHIELD had received rumors that the AIM cell in question was experimenting with dirty bomb technology as well as biochemical warfare. Phil had confidence that Ty Booker could handle himself, since he was ex-Army, ex-EOD, but Agent Jankovic...

“We’ll be ready, sir,” said Agent David Fisher, and Phil saw Barton roll his eyes. Fisher’s eager-beaver, stand-up-straight-and-salute attitude was already wearing a little thin.

“I’m sure you will. All of you. Your training schedules have been sent to your calendars. You’ll see that there are team exercises every morning, and skill refreshers every afternoon.”

“I saw my schedule this morning, and I had a question.” Barton spoke up.

“Yes Barton?”

“Um, well, I’m down for a first-aid refresher tomorrow afternoon for like, four hours. I just did my annual first-aid recertification three months ago. Wouldn’t my time would be better spent on something else?”

Normally, it would have been a valid question. But this op was different. “We’re going to be hundreds of miles from the nearest hospital, once we go in,” Coulson said. “If anyone gets hurt, all you’re going to have is the contents of your first-aid kit and your training to keep them alive for the 48 hours to extraction. I want everyone’s field trauma training to be completely up to date.” Phil knew his voice was sharp, but Barton and the rest of the team needed to understand how serious he was. And how dangerous this mission was. They were going in almost blind, with the smallest team possible and no back-up.

“Sure thing, boss,” Barton said, nodding to show he understood. Fisher shot him a dirty look and Barton cheerfully gave him the finger.

“Settle down. Are there any other questions? No? Good. If you have any questions or concerns about anything at all, come see me at any time. My door is always open. I’ll see you all for exercises tomorrow morning at 08:30.”

“Thank you, sir,” Fisher said and stood up then saluted smartly. Phil nodded at him, then gathered his papers and folders. The fawning was starting to grate, but Fisher was a very competent field agent, so Phil was going to put up with it for as long as necessary.

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Phil’s hands were bound above his head. His shoulders ached from the strain, just one of the many points of pain in his battered body. In the dim light of a couple of smoky candles, he could see the rusted old truck battery sitting on the table, a set of lead wires snaking from the contacts. He wanted to close his eyes, to not see it, but that would be worse. Not knowing what was coming. Or when. There was a sound behind him and he couldn’t help flinching. He heard a chuckle, low and menacing, then hot breath on the back of his neck. Every muscle in his body went rigid, even though he knew that would make it so much worse. A shadowy
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figure picked up the wires and came towards him, and the man behind him grabbed his hips…

Phil woke up shaking and covered in sweat. His stomach churned and he knew he wouldn't be able to make it to the bathroom. It was all he could do to force his body to move enough to roll over so that he could throw up on the floor. He lay there gasping, head hanging over the side of the bed, trembling uncontrollably.

"Just a dream. It was just a dream. I'm okay. It wasn't real. I'm safe. I'm in New York, in my apartment. It was nightmare." His stomach lurched again and he spit out a mouthful of bile. He closed his eyes so as not to be staring at a puddle of his own vomit on the floor, but snapped them open again immediately when the images from the dream swam in front of his eyes. He reached over to snap on the bedside lamp.

"Get up. Clean up. I'm okay. I'm safe." Phil dragged himself out of bed. He stumbled to the bathroom, and rinsed out his mouth, and splashed water on his face. He forced himself to look at himself in the mirror. He focused on the clothes he was wearing: a ragged grey t-shirt with a faded SHIELD logo on the front, and navy sweat pants. "I'm safe. I'm at home, and I'm safe," he said to his reflection. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Mechanically, focussing only on the steps necessary to complete the next task, he got a garbage bag, a roll of paper towels, and a bottle of cleaner. He cleaned the mess off his bedroom floor, gagging a couple of times at the smell, but soldiering on.

Once he'd done that he washed his hands and face again, then made himself a cup of coffee, still forcing himself to focus only on the next step. Coffee can out of cupboard. Filter out of cupboard. Filter in machine. Coffee in machine. Water in machine. Turn machine on.

While he waited for the coffee to brew, the images of the dream drifted into his field of vision. Phil blinked them away. Staring at the coffee pot, waiting for it to fill was not an option. Phil went to the tiny second bedroom of his apartment which was meant to be his home office but served mostly as an oversized storage closet. There was a desk, however, and a filing cabinet. A secure, fireproof, locked filing cabinet.

Back to the hall for his keys. Back to the office. One foot in front of the other. One thing at a time. 'Unlock the cabinet. Open the bottom drawer. Take out the lock box.'

He sat the heavy lockbox on the floor and closed (and locked) the filing cabinet. He carried the lockbox into the living room. He heard the coffee machine gurgle its distinctive 'I'm done' sound. He put the lockbox on the coffee table and went to the kitchen, stopping to check the locks on his front door on the way.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and added cream and sugar. Lots of sugar. His hands were only trembling a little. He carried the cup of coffee through to the living room and put it on the table next to the box. He unlocked the box and took out a Beretta M9 and laid it on the table next to his coffee cup.

"I'm okay. I'm safe," he said as he took the magazine out of the box and fed cartridges into it, one by one. He slid the magazine home, but didn't rack a cartridge into the chamber. He put

the gun down on the table in front of him and picked his coffee cup up. He sank back into the cushions of the sofa. His sofa. In his apartment. He was safe. He was home. He was safe.

Phil turned on the TV and fired up his TiVo and called up an episode of Storage Wars he hadn't yet seen. He drank his coffee and took deep breaths and glanced every so often at the locked door and the gun sitting on the coffee table. Eventually he stopped shaking. He didn't go back to bed.

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"Phil, can I talk to you?"

Phil looked up in surprise to see Jasper Sitwell at his office door. It was well past 8 p.m. and Jasper usually left by seven. "Of course, what is it?"

Rather than answering, Jasper came into his office, shut the door firmly behind himself, and sat down.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine." Phil's answer was guarded. Jasper was up to something.

"The Bolivia op, everything going well?"

"As well as can be expected, all things considered."

"And you're sleeping okay? You look a little tired."

"What's this about Jasper?"

"Barton came to talk to me. He said that something feels odd about this mission. That you're a lot more tense than you usually are when you're planning an op," Jasper said, looking Phil straight in the eyes and daring him to deny it.

Phil carefully schooled his face while what he actually wanted to do was lean back in his chair, close his eyes, and sigh. Barton had tried to talk to him yesterday morning about something to do with his hearing aid. Phil's nerves had still been jangling from the nightmare, and he was burying himself in the preparations for the operation to try to ignore it. So he'd been… brusque with Barton, snapping at him that he was supposed to be at a training session on Bolivian flora and fauna and why wasn't he already on his way to classroom 6-B?

So Phil wasn't going to deny it, but he did try to deflect. "Barton notices things."

"He especially notices things to do with you."

"Jasper," Phil said in a tone that warned his friend away from that particular topic.

"I didn't mean it that way Phil. I just meant that he's your friend and he cares about you, like I do. And he's worried about you, like I am. And if Barton noticed, how long do you think it's going to be before Fury notices?"
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“We’re wheels up in less than 48 hours,” Phil said, then sighed and rubbed a tired hand across his face.

“Have you been having nightmares?” Jasper asked gently.

“Just one. Night before last.”

“Bad?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s the first one in how long?”

“Eight months. I’m cleared for field duty, Jaz. And I haven’t skipped or evaded a single psych session.” Phil couldn’t help crossing his arms tightly across his chest.

“You’re smart enough to run circles around most of the headshrinkers in Psych.”

“They wouldn’t have cleared me if I wasn’t fit for duty,” Phil said stubbornly.

“I’m not saying you’re not up to it. I’m just saying that people have noticed that this particular mission is getting under your skin. Barton said you sent out an email this morning reminding your team to memorize each other’s blood types.”

“A reasonable precaution, based on how far we’re going to be from any kind of backup-” Phil started to say.

Jasper waved a hand at him. “All I’m saying is that maybe you need to dial it down a little. You’ve got a good team on this, they’re going to be fine.”

“Jankovic and Booker-”

Jasper interrupted him again. “Have been through training and are weapons certified. And Ty was in the army, even though he’s been driving a lab bench for the past ten years. And they have you and Barton and Fisher and LeClaire to look after them. They’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t see you at my mission briefing.”

“Just keeping up to speed.”

“Keeping tabs on me you mean,” Phil said, not bothering to keep the bitterness he felt out of his voice.

“Looking out for one of my oldest and closest friends, you mean.”

Phil wiped his hand across his eyes again and sagged back into his chair. “Yeah, okay Jaz, message received. I know I’ve got a good team; I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s gonna bite us on the ass.”

“And if it does, you’ll deal with it, just like you always do. Trust yourself, Phil. And your team.”

Phil nodded. “What are you going to tell Barton?”

“What do you want me to tell him?” Jasper’s eyebrows arched.

“I don’t know. That I’m fine. That everything’s fine… Hell, I don’t know.”

“I’ll think of something,” Jasper said standing up.

Phil snorted, and Jasper shot him with his forefinger as he headed for the door.

“Hey, Jaz,” Phil said as Jasper put his hand on the door handle. Jasper turned. “Thanks.”

“Just keep your eyes open.” Jasper said.

“I’ve got Barton for that,” Phil said with a very small smile.

“That you do, Phil, that you do.” Jasper said, and left before Phil could throw something at his head.

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Final briefing had been this morning. They’d gone over the target’s location, the enemy’s capabilities, the victim’s description and the extraction plan. They’d be taking a Quinjet to a clearing just outside a local village 25 kilometers away from the target, where one of their people on the ground had stashed a truck. They’d drive to within five klicks of the AIM compound and then hike the rest of the way in.

They’d spent two hours this afternoon going over every inch of their gear. Clint had been so happy when Coulson had said he could take his bow on this mission that he didn’t even mind the snarky comment that Fisher made about it as they were packing up. Coulson, who often came to his defense when someone doubted his choice of weapon, had seemed distracted, and had simply told them to leave their gear on the tarmac and go get a few hours sleep before wheels up.

Clint had mostly tossed and turned, so he was a few minutes early to the flight deck. When he got there, he stopped and stared for a minute before heading over to check his gear one last time. He’d seen Coulson in full field suit before, of course, but that had been a couple of years ago, in Mexico when the mission suddenly required them to be a lot more hands-on than the original brief. That was when he hardly knew the man, and long before the low simmering physical attraction had taken up residence in Clint’s gut. Coulson was talking to Sitwell, their heads were close together and Sitwell seemed to be trying to convince Coulson of something. Clint watched, trying to lipread, and made out what might have been ‘good team’ from Sitwell, and an answering ‘I know that’ from Coulson. Then Sitwell headed off, but changed direction when he spotted Clint.

Clint stopped pretending to check his gear and stood up as Sitwell approached.
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“Barton,” Sitwell said, looking him up and down, but then not saying anything else.

“Sitwell,” Clint answered with a bit of a smirk. Over Jasper’s shoulder he could see Coulson talking to the Quinjet pilot. “Is he okay?” Clint asked, not sure if he’d even get a reply.

“I hope so,” Sitwell said. Then, “Bring him back safe, Clint.” Jasper’s voice was soft in contrast to the hard stare he was giving Clint.

Clint’s throat closed up and he had to swallow before he answered. “I will, or die trying,” he said. He tried to make a joke of it by grinning, but he knew Jasper wasn’t fooled. He meant the words with all his heart.

The flight was long and managed to be both tense and boring. Clint managed a bit more sleep, curled up in a corner of the cargo bay with his bow-case for a pillow. He woke up when the vibration of the Quinjet engines changed, signaling their descent, and moved back to his seat. Everyone seemed tense, now, and Clint had to admit to himself that he was keyed up too. He was the most junior agent on this mission, he realized, even Rose LeClair, whose six-foot height and muscular build was a stark contrast to her soft Cajun accent, had been with SHIELD longer, and was a Level 4 Agent. Clint didn’t have anything to prove. He knew Coulson trusted his skills, and that’s why he was here, plain and simple. But something was up with his handler, and Sitwell’s words rang in his ears.

The jet landed and they climbed off and transferred their gear to the truck. Fisher was driving, of course, with Coulson sitting up front next to him. Clint fought down an irrational surge of jealousy, and climbed in next to Tyrone Booker. Clint pasted a cocky grin on his face and told Ty a dirty joke. Anskia Jankovic, the biochemist, shot back with one that was even filthier, and that set the tone for the group in the back of the truck for the trip. By the time they arrived at the end of the disused logging road they’d been following, the four agents in the back had been laughing and joking the whole way, and were much more relaxed.

Clint noticed as they disembarked that Coulson looked a little more relaxed, too, but that Fisher wore an expression of disapproval. ‘Screw you, tight-ass,’ Clint thought, but didn’t voice. His thoughts were even more uncharitable when Fisher tried to carry some of Coulson’s gear for him.

“I can manage, thank you, Agent,” was Coulson’s tight-lipped reply, and Clint cheered inwardly. ‘Coulson doesn’t need anybody’s help, especially not yours, ass-licker!’ he thought. Coulson ordered them to gear up and move out, so he didn’t have time to reflect on the cause of his sudden antagonism towards Fisher, because he was now on full alert to his surroundings. He hoisted his pack and his bow case onto his left shoulder and, with his rifle in his right hand, took his place in the line of agents who started down the trail.

Coulson had decided their marching order during the briefings, and so they all fell in without any discussion. LeClair was in the lead, since she had the most experience with this kind of terrain. Clint was second for his eyesight, then Coulson, in the middle so that if he needed to give orders he could be heard by everyone. Jankovic the scientist and most vulnerable in a fight was directly behind him, then Booker and Fisher was bringing up the rear.

‘Good spot for him, at the ass-end.’ Clint thought as they moved out. Walking five klicks through a jungle wasn’t the most difficult thing Clint had ever been asked to do for SHIELD, and apart from being on alert, his eyes scanning the trees and undergrowth constantly, he was actually having fun. He’d spotted a dozen different birds, three snakes and what he was pretty sure was a mongoose by the time Coulson called a short rest break.

They closed ranks and gathered around Coulson.

“Make sure you stay hydrated,” Coulson said, and most of them dutifully took their canteens off their hips and drank some water. Clint suddenly wished he’d thought to break open one of the MREs in his pack and pour the Gatorade crystals into his canteen. ‘I’ll do that as soon as we stop for a bit,’ he decided, not wanting to take the risk of causing a delay.

“Anyone having any trouble with their gear?” Coulson asked, looking around the circle. “Packs, boots, anything?”

“No, sir,” Fisher snapped smartly as if he was on a parade ground, and Clint bit off the snide remark. Much as he would have loved to take the guy down a peg or two, he didn’t want to make an ass of himself in front of Coulson. There was a quiet “No, sir” from LeClaire and a chorus of negatives and head shakes from everyone else.

“Okay, be as quiet as you can from here on in. We’re moving to within one kilometer of the target, at which point we’ll establish a base camp. Everyone ready to continue?”

Clint thought he saw Coulson roll his eyes at Fisher’s crisp, “Yes, sir,” but he was already motioning them to move out.

The rest of the walk was uneventful, as was setting up camp. Once they’d all had something to eat, Coulson pulled out the satellite map and his GPS. Which was having trouble getting a signal through the dense canopy.

Coulson looked at the device with a frown. “It would be better to get a positive fix on our location, but we can do without it.”

“Um, Coulson?” Clint said, hating how unsure of himself he sounded in front of the group. “If you want, I could take it up, see if it can get a signal that way.” Clint pointed at the GPS and then a nearby tall tree.

Fisher laughed. “Going to regale us with one of your circus tricks, Barton?” but he shut his mouth with a snap when Coulson glared at him.

“That is an excellent idea, Agent Barton. Thank you,” he said, handing over the unit. Clint clipped it onto his belt and shot Fisher a smirk.

“Don’t fall out,” Ty said, grinning widely at him.

“Not a chance,” Clint said, and moments later was scaling the smooth trunk. He shoved Fisher’s jeer to the back of his mind, because he knew he had to concentrate. Not on the climb, that he could do with his eyes closed (and often had), but Coulson had made them

spend a morning learning about every single poisonous plant, animal, and insect in the Bolivian jungle, and now as he climbed, Clint had his eyes peeled for all of them. The only thing he spotted was a pretty yellow-and-brown mottled boa snake which hissed at him lazily as he went by. Once he was up in the canopy, the vegetation thinned out, and the GPS beeped. He found himself a solid perch, and took the unit off his belt, pressing the button to log a way-point. Then he climbed a little higher, getting into the thinner branches, and stuck his head up to take a look around.

Clint immediately spotted a clearing with smoke rising from it about a kilometer and a half directly north. He carefully scanned 360 degrees, looking for anything else that could be another compound, a watchtower, anything. There was nothing. Satisfied that he couldn't get any more useful information from the tree-tops, he shimmied back down the tree, stopping about ten feet off the ground and leaping from the trunk, landing in a roll and bouncing to his feet in front of Coulson. He handed over the GPS unit with an exaggerated bow, and got a smattering of quiet applause from Booker, Jankovic, and LeClair.

"Thank you Barton," Coulson said with a smile that didn't get past his eyes, but Clint saw anyway.

"Any time, boss," Clint said, flopping back down onto the grass and taking a swig of Gatorade from his canteen.

Coulson crouched over the map and the GPS, marking their location with a grease pencil. "According to these readings, the compound should be one-and-a-half kilometers due north of our position. Barton, while you were up there, I don't suppose you were able to spot-"

"The compound? Yep, due north. Just a small clearing. I couldn't see how many buildings there were, but there was a glint like the sun reflecting on a metal roof, and smoke from a fire."

"Okay," Coulson nodded to himself, satisfied. "Everyone gets a few hours rest. Barton and LeClair are on scout detail at nineteen-hundred hours, which should put you at the compound at dusk. If everything goes according to plan, we'll go in just before dawn tomorrow."

LeClair immediately rolled out her sleeping bag and stretched out on it, and even though Clint felt too keyed up to sleep, he did the same. To distract himself while he nodded off, he went over ways to convince Coulson that he should just take his bow on the scouting mission. He could move better if he was less encumbered. It was (almost) silent, and if he needed to shoot, he would be able to without betraying their presence. Being shot with an arrow confused even hardened criminals, and gave him a few precious milliseconds advantage…

Clint woke up when LeClaire shifted beside him. His eyes snapped open. "Time to hit the road?" She nodded. "Okay, gimme a second to go take a piss."

Clint stepped behind a tree and relieved his bladder, then went back to where LeClair was getting last-minute instructions from Coulson. He listened, and nodded, and then said, "Boss, I was thinking I should leave the rifle and just take my bow. It's quiet, and-" Coulson, who was clearly already on the same page, interrupted.

“And you’ll be able to move faster and more quietly if you’re not encumbered. I wasn’t going to suggest it, but if you’re comfortable…”

“Totally comfortable.”

“Okay, then. Stick to the plan. Keep in constant visual contact with each other and in radio contact with me. Learn as much as you can, but don’t take any risks.” Coulson’s eyes were on him as he said that, and Clint nodded. If it had been just the two of them, he’d have promised, but he wasn’t going to do that in front of other people. Beside him, LeClair voiced another quiet “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” Clint said, and they moved northwards into the jungle.

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“…so getting her out should be a piece of cake, but I don’t see how we’re going to destroy all the equipment without waking everyone up.” Clint and LeClaire had taken turns describing everything they’d seen at the compound, and Clint was summing up.

“Timed charges are our best bet,” Booker said, “I can rig them to go off once we’re clear.”

“Yes,” said Jankovic, “but only after I’ve checked to make sure that we don’t risk contaminating the entire region.”

“Agreed,” said Coulson.

Clint was watching his face and knew that Coulson’s brain was racing at a hundred miles per hour.

“So we go in on two fronts, Jankovic and Booker to the lab, with Fisher for cover. Barton and LeClair will extract Dr. Olofsson, and I’ll cover their exit. Once Olofsson’s clear, and hopefully has been able to confirm that it’s safe to blow the lab, Booker will set the charges and we’ll all get out. Comments?”

There were many. ‘What if’ and ‘we could also’ and ‘have you considered?’ Coulson had. The plan was solid, and once they’d talked it through for another ten minutes, everyone seemed happy with it.

“Good. Barton and LeClair, you two slept earlier, so which of you wants first watch?”

“I’ll take it, boss,” Clint said quickly. LeClair shrugged at him.

“Okay, LeClair second, I’ll take third and Fisher you’ve got last.”

“I can stand a watch,” Ty Booker said.

“Fine with me,” said LeClaire, “You can have mine.” But she looked at Coulson for permission, who nodded.
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It took a few minutes for everyone to settle down for the night, during which Clint picked up his bow from where he'd left it leaning against a tree. Fisher glanced at him, and he replied with a dirty look, daring the man to say anything about his choice of weapon. If someone attacked them during the night, he'd be able to take them out silently, and thus not blow the entire operation. Clint made a full circuit of their campsite and when he circled back he found Coulson sitting at the edge of the small clearing, his back to a tree.

Clint's sharp eyes picked up that Coulson's holster was unsnapped, giving him quick access to his sidearm. It hadn't been that way earlier, when they'd been plotting mission strategy, Clint was sure. He squatted down near Coulson, but kept his eyes moving, checking every bit of jungle around them.

"Not sleepy yet?" Clint asked, trying to keep his tone light.

"Just wanted a few minutes of quiet before I lay down," Coulson said, and Clint made to move away.

"Sorry, I'll leave you to-"

"No, it's okay. Stay, please."

The 'please' was so soft that Clint wasn't sure he'd heard it at all, but he sank back down on his heels. Coulson didn't say anything else, just looked out into the jungle in the fading light. The silence between them was comfortable, though, and Clint was reminded of the mission they'd done together earlier that year, and quiet evenings together on a beach. Clint wished he was better with words so that he could say the right thing. Something, anything, to tell Coulson that he was looking out for him, that nothing bad was going to happen on Clint's watch, if he could help it. But Clint knew he didn't have the right words, so he kept his mouth shut. After another five minutes, Coulson unfolded himself from the base of the tree.

"Goodnight," Coulson said, and Clint nodded up at him.

"Goodnight boss, sleep well."

"I'll try. And Barton, thank you."

Clint wasn't sure what he was being thanked for, but he smiled back anyway.

"Anytime, boss," he said softly. "Anytime." And he noticed that Coulson picked a spot next to his to roll out a sleeping bag and settle down.

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As they had planned, Rose LeClair belly-crawled up to the hut where Dr. Marta Olofsson was being held. After silently picking the lock she slipped inside, and Clint held his breath waiting for her to emerge with Olofsson in tow. Which eventually, she did.

"The package is secure," Clint whispered into his comms, getting a terse "Acknowledged," back from Coulson. Clint had an arrow nocked and ready as LeClair led the biochemist out of
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the AIM compound to the edge of the jungle where Clint was hiding. As they came near, he could hear Dr. Olofsson whispering urgently to LeClair, and LeClair answering, but he couldn't make out what they were talking about. As soon as they made it to his position, Clint led them back into the jungle towards where Coulson was waiting.

"You don't understand, he's a monster! Insane! He'll do it, I know he will. Please. We can't just leave," Olofsson was saying to LeClair.

"What's up?" Clint asked, his eyes scanning the jungle around him and the path behind them.

"Dr. Olofsson says that the guy running this show has ensured the locals' co-operation, and hers, by threatening to kill all the children in the village if anyone tries to escape."

"Shit."

"Yes."

They reached Coulson's position and the three of them crouched down.

"Coulson, we have a situation here," Barton said, nodding at the scientist they had just rescued.

"Please," Olofsson said to Coulson. "If you're not here to capture him, let me go back. He'll kill the children, I know he will."

"Where are the children? Can we extract them?" Coulson asked. "Rescue them too," he added, translating for Olofsson.

"They're in the village, not the compound. He'll go and take them after you leave and kill them just because I escaped. Please. You must capture him or kill him. He's a horrible man, a monster! I've seen him do terrible things. Hurt people, torture them." Olofsson was shaking and LeClaire handed her a canteen.

"Where is he? Where does he sleep, which hut? Do you know?" Coulson asked, and Clint knew that the plan was off the rails.

"Yes, in the big one with the screens on the windows."

"How many people are in there, does he have guards?" Coulson was asking, when the comms chirped softly and Booker's voice asked, "Do we have a 'go' on the destruction of the research materials yet?"

Clint saw Coulson's jaw set in a hard line.

"Dr. Olofsson, we will try to…" Coulson paused, "eliminate this man you say poses a danger to the local children, but we need to make sure that the research you were forced to do is destroyed as well. I'm going to put you on the line with our biochemist and our explosives expert, and I'd like you to confer with them to ensure we can do that safely. Agent LeClair, please give Dr. Olofsson your comm unit." Coulson spoke calmly and gently to the frightened scientist, but Clint could see the tension in his face.

“I’ll go after him, just say the word. I can creep in so quiet a mouse wouldn’t hear me and put an arrow through his throat.” Clint was speaking quietly, but urgently, hoping Coulson would agree.

Coulson shook his head. “Wait until we’ve confirmed that we can safely destroy the research, then I’ll decide who, if anyone, is going in.”

“Okay boss,” Clint said, knowing from experience that under these circumstances, further argument would only annoy Coulson. Besides, all the earlier tension had returned to his shoulders, and Clint was worried about him again. Clint fought down an urge to reach out with words, if not physically, and say something dumb like ‘It’s going to be okay.’

“… confirmed that incendiary charges will destroy the toxin as well as the missiles he was going to use to deliver it. There’s a small chance we’ll set the jungle on fire, though,” Ty was saying over the radio.

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” Coulson said. “We can radio SHIELD as soon as we’re clear, call in a water bomber, and get messages to the local villages to evacuate if necessary.”

“Acknowledged. How long do I set the timer on the charges for?”

“Just a minute.” Coulson said into his comms, then asked Dr. Olofsson, “Can you walk a distance?”

“Yes.”

“And if she can’t, I’ll carry her,” said LeClair. Coulson nodded. The scientist they had rescued was a petite woman, and LeClair would have no trouble carrying her if necessary.

“Set the charges for 10 minutes, and then make for the rendezvous. LeClair, you take Dr. Olofsson to the rendezvous point. Barton and I are going to deal with the other matter.” Coulson was on open comms, making sure everyone understood the plan.

“Sir, I could-“ Fisher’s voice came over the radio but Coulson interrupted him.

“Agent Fisher, I’m putting you in charge of getting everyone to the extraction point, in case Barton and I are delayed. Is that understood?”

“Sir, yes sir!” said Fisher, and Clint mimed a Boy Scout salute at LeClair, who rolled her eyes at the eager-beaver.

“If we aren’t at the rendezvous point in ten minutes, leave without us. We’ll catch up. Agent Booker, set the explosives for ten minute delay on my mark. Mark.” Coulson looked around the group.

“Good luck, sir,” LeClair said, and motioned for Dr. Olofsson to follow her.

“You take the lead,” Coulson said. “I’ll watch your back.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Clint wanted to say something else, but he couldn’t find the words. He wished he could reach out and squeeze Coulson’s arm, but he knew he couldn’t do that, either. So he nodded and led the way back through the jungle.

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Clint’s nerves were zinging with tension as they crept through the compound. Getting into the hut was no problem. They quickly made sure the single room was clear, and Clint dispatched the man silently with one of his razor-sharp throwing knives. They crept back out of the hut towards the rendezvous point. Clint was just starting to relax and congratulate himself on a job well done when they heard a yell from ahead and all hell broke loose. Clint sprinted towards the source of the screams and gunshots with Coulson close on his heels. They arrived to find the four SHIELD agents forming a ring around Dr. Olofsson, shooting at attackers who were hiding in the trees. Clint quickly spotted one and nocked an arrow. At his back his back he felt Coulson draw his gun.

Just then there was a massive explosion that rocked the ground under their feet. Clint kept his focus on the action, trusting Coulson to watch his back. He saw Fisher go down and LeClair fire at the trees, hitting someone, based on the screaming. Booker was firing at a something that Clint’s couldn’t see, which almost certainly meant there was nothing there. Jankovic was kneeling beside Fisher and pulling out a first aid kit. Clint saw a shadow move to his left and spun with his bow.

A huge, brutish man in dirty yellow coveralls was running towards him, snarling. Clint put an arrow into the man’s chest but it didn’t even slow him down. Before Clint could get a second arrow nocked the giant was too close, so Clint swung his bow like a club instead. Behind him he could hear Coulson firing and figured out that the explosion had woken all the goons in the compound, who were now heading towards them.

In his ear, Coulson was relaying calm, crisp orders over the comms and he was getting calm replies from LeClair, and somewhat shakier ones from Booker. Then Clint lost the thread of the chatter on the comms, because he was fighting for his life. The brute seemed unaffected by the blows from Clint’s bow and he launched himself at Clint taking them both down in a heap. Clint felt a sharp pain in his ankle, but it was nothing compared to the fact that the guy had his forearm across Clint’s throat and was in the process of choking him. Clint managed to get one of his throwing knives out, and spent a precious second reviewing the anatomy he’d just learned in his first-aid refresher before plunging the knife into what he hoped was the brute’s carotid artery.

It seemed to work, because the guy screamed and clamped his hand to the spurting wound, which gave Clint the opportunity to shove the man’s bulk off him. He quickly rolled to his knees, drew his sidearm with one hand and another throwing knife with the other, and picked off three of the AIM operatives who were closing in on Coulson and the rest of the team.

“You okay Barton?” Coulson yelled between carefully placed shots. Clint was impressed with both his accuracy and coolness under fire.

“Fine” Clint called back, emptying his clip and switching mags. His ankle was aching, he’d probably twisted it, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t easily ignore. It seemed like every
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single AIM agent in the compound was coming at them. Clint was counting his shots and looking around for his bow, on the off chance that it was still functional. He spotted it and tried to sprint towards it, but his ankle gave out under him and he went down with a cry.

“Clint!” he heard Coulson yell, and he rolled over to see Coulson coming towards him, a gun in each hand, firing at and dropping the remaining bad guys. It was one of the sexiest things Clint had ever seen.

“I’m okay, boss, just twisted my ankle, that’s all,” he said as Coulson dropped into a crouch next to him. Around them, the firing had tapered off.

“You’re not hit?”

“No, I’m fine, really.”

“When you went down like that, I thought…”

“Just my ankle, I promise.”

“Okay. Good.” Coulson turned his head. “LeClair, check for stragglers or anyone hiding out in the bush. Booker, rig a stretcher for Fisher.” Then he turned back to Clint. “Can you walk?”

“Sure, just help me up and I’ll be fine.” Clint expected Coulson to simply give him a hand, but instead he holstered one of the two guns and grabbed Clint’s arm, pulling it around his shoulder. “Ready? Up.”

Clint stood and gritted his teeth against a whine of pain. Putting as little weight on his injured ankle as he could, he leaned heavily on Coulson and hobbled over to where Jankovic was taking care of Fisher. Clint propped himself up against a tree.

“How is he?” Coulson asked, nodding at Fisher.

“I’ve done everything I can for him here. He needs proper medical attention fast.”

“We’ll move out as soon as we can.”

The next few minutes made Clint feel completely useless as he watched the rest of his team rig a stretcher for Fisher and sort out the minimum of gear they needed to carry back to the extraction point. Clint slung a rifle over his shoulder and filled his pockets with extra clips for it and his sidearm. If he was going to be a liability, at least he could be a well-armed one.

LeClair reported that she hadn’t spotted any more bad guys, so Coulson told them to get ready to move.

“You’ve got point again,” He said to LeClair, who nodded. “Then Booker and Jankovic with Fisher, then Dr. Olofsson. Barton and I will bring up the rear. Come on,” he said, reaching for Clint’s arm. “Let’s move.”

Clint wanted to object, to say that he was okay, he could walk on his own, but excruciating pain shot up his leg when he tried to put weight on his ankle, so he set his jaw and let Coulson act as a crutch. He wasn't looking forward to hobbling over three kilometers through the jungle, but they didn't have any other option. The AIM compound was on fire so a Quinjet couldn't land. The jungle canopy was so dense that winching a stretcher up through it would be impossible, so they had to walk back to the nearest clearing. At least they didn't have to go all the way back to the drop-off point, ten klicks away. Clint tried to be thankful for small mercies.

"Do you want something for the pain?" Coulson asked, and Clint realized that he must have made a noise when his toe caught on a vine and wrenched his ankle.

"No. Anything strong enough to make a dent would slow down my reaction time, and we can't afford that. I'm okay. I can handle it."

Coulson just gave a little nod.

Clint was sweating and shaking by the time Coulson called a halt. He had to shout, because the others were making better time than they were, despite carrying a stretcher.

Jankovic checked on Fisher and her expression when she looked up at Coulson was grim. "We need to get him out as fast as we can."

"Three minutes rest. Everyone drink some water and eat a PowerBar or something." Coulson used a tone that discouraged argument.

Clint dutifully took his canteen off his hip and swigged down the last of his Gatorade. Then he dug a PowerBar out of his pocket and took a couple of bites. When he noticed that Coulson wasn't eating, he said, "Boss?" and held the half-bar out towards him.

Coulson looked like he wanted to refuse, but knew that Clint would jump on him for not following his own advice, so he took the bar and broke off half of what was left before handing it back. Clint stuffed the remainder into his pocket and said quietly, "You should leave me. I'm slowing you down and Fisher doesn't have the time to spare."

"No," Coulson said in a flat, dismissive tone, and turned to look at where Booker and Jankovic were getting ready to pick up Fisher's stretcher.

"Coulson, I'll be fine. Leave me a couple of guns and a pile of ammo. It's just a sprained ankle, and we got all the goons back there–"

"We don't know that."

"Well, probably. Like I said, leave me a couple of guns and come back for me after Fisher's looked after. Boss," Clint let the pain he was in show in his eyes. "I'm not going to be able to keep up."

"Fine, then I'll carry you."

"What? No way! You can't–"

“Don’t even think of telling me what I can’t do, Barton,” Coulson snapped.

“Coulson, don’t be stupid. Just leave me, I’ll be fine.”

“I am not leaving you behind,” and the quiet ferocity with which Coulson said the words took Clint’s breath away. “If I have to, I will knock you unconscious and carry you, but it’d be a lot easier if you’re conscious. And armed.”

“Yeah, okay.” Clint knew there was no way he was going to win this fight. He wasn’t sure exactly what was going on, but whatever it was, Coulson was deadly serious about it.

Coulson turned his back and crouched a little. “Come on, then.”

Clint awkwardly clambered onto Coulson’s back, hissing again when his ankle got knocked. Then he didn’t know where to put his hands.

“Uh, where do you want me to…” Clint said, trying not to touch Coulson.

“It’s okay, Clint.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to, uh…”

“I said it’s okay. Grab hold wherever’s comfortable.”

“Um, okay.” Clint wrapped his left arm around Coulson’s chest, anchoring it by grabbing onto one of the straps on his tac-suit. With that leverage, he settled his thighs more comfortable around Coulson’s hips, and squeezed.

Coulson grunted.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?” Clint said quickly, loosening his grip.

“No, it’s fine. Hang on tight, here we go.” And Coulson set off at comfortable pace, easily keeping up with the stretcher.

Clint tried to distract himself from the feel of Coulson’s body by carefully scanning the jungle around them for enemies, predators, and other dangers.

He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed when they reached the extraction point and he carefully slid off Coulson’s back. Coulson made sure he was reasonably comfortable leaning against a tree, then went to check on the others and radio the waiting Quinjet. Five minutes later he was lying on his back on the floor of the cargo bay next to Fisher. There was an inflatable cast on his ankle and a shot of painkiller coursing through his system. Coulson was up front with the pilot, and Clint tried not to feel disappointed about that.

Coulson had work to do. An op to report on. He was fine. There was no reason that Coulson should be checking on him or paying attention to him, or anything. Lying there, staring at the ceiling Clint realized that any chance he might have had of ignoring the crush he was developing on his handler was futile. The best he could hope for now was to come up with some coping mechanisms until he figured out how to bury his feelings, good and deep.

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Phil sat in a chair next to Clint's bed. He was carefully avoiding examining why, exactly, he was here. Except that there was something about Clint. Barton. He shouldn't be calling him 'Clint,' not even in the privacy of his own head. There was something about Barton that made Phil absolutely certain that having someone there when he woke up from surgery would mean a lot to him. Phil hadn't even considered doing this for Fisher, the pompous little ass. But Fisher was just another agent. Barton… Aw, the hell with it. Clint was his friend. Besides, he had something to help Clint occupy his time while his ankle healed, and giving it to him was a thinly veiled excuse for Phil's presence here, by Clint's bedside.

Clint looked younger when he was asleep, relaxed and… not innocent. The lines on his face, not to mention the scars on his skin, were too numerous and deep for him to look anything but like the hardened soldier he was. But he looked at peace in a way that Phil never saw otherwise. He wondered, briefly, if Clint thought the same about him.

Clint stirred, and Phil watched as his eyes fluttered open and his body tensed.

"You're in SHIELD medical. They operated on your ankle," Phil said in a calm, even voice.

"Yeah," Clint said, and turned his head to look at Phil. "Thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. I'm guessing I'm still on some heavy-duty painkillers for the ankle? How many screws?"

"You're on oxycontin and you can come off it as soon as you want to, just tell the nurse. And I'll have the orthopedic surgeon come and show you the post-op x-rays so that you can see the screws for yourself. Three of them."

"Thanks boss, you're the best." Clint's throat was scratchy and Phil reached for the ubiquitous styrofoam cup of water on the bedside table. It was next to the laptop computer he'd brought with him. Once Clint had drunk his fill and handed the cup back, let his head fall back onto the pillow, and said, "Okay, hit me with the bad news. How long am I out for?"

"You'll be up and walking on crutches within three days, then it's six to eight weeks of rehab at least." Phil knew that there was no use in sugar-coating.

"I'm going to go batshit within a week, you know that, right?" Clint looked unhappy and resigned.

"Well, I had an idea about that." Phil said, unable to suppress a small smile. "How would you like to learn to fly?"

Clint rolled his head to the side and regarded Phil quizzically. "I did some flying when I was younger, but I'm awfully heavy for it now. I'd make a better catcher, but why does SHIELD need… You're not talking about trapeze work, are you?"
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“Quinjets, Clint. Would you like to learn how to fly them?” Phil knew he was grinning outright now, but couldn’t help himself.

“Holy shit! Do you really mean it?”

Phil nodded, inordinately pleased with Clint’s thrilled expression as he handed over the laptop. “It’s already loaded with the complete High School Math curriculum. Show me a 75% pass and I’ll enroll you in the next cadre of pilot training.”

“Coulson…” Clint actually sounded like he was a bit choked up. He cleared his throat, and then sat up straight in the hospital bed before saying seriously, “Thank you, sir.”

Phil was feeling a little thickness in his own throat at the sincerity with which Clint used the honorific. “You’ve earned it. And you’re welcome.” He wished there was something else he could bring himself to say, but there wasn’t. Before the silence could get awkward Phil asked, “Is there anything else I can bring you, books, clothes?”

“Um, well, if it’s not too much trouble, you’ve, uh, still got the key to my place, right?”

Phil patted his trouser pocket, making his key ring jingle.

“Uh, well, some t-shirts and sweats would be great, anything that’s clean is fine, and, uh, there’s a stack of books on the floor next to the futon - those are the ones I’m currently reading, so when I, uh, you know, need a break from the math…”

“Of course, no problem at all. I’ll swing by your place on my way home tonight and bring your clothes and books first thing tomorrow.”

“That’s, uh, that’d be great, boss, thanks.” Clint looked like the was blushing, just a tiny bit, and Phil wondered why.

“No problem. Now, unfortunately, I still have a huge stack of post-mission paperwork to finish, so I’ve got to head out.” Phil climbed reluctantly to his feet, wishing there was a reason for him to stay longer.

“‘Course. Thanks for, uh, being here. I really appreciate it. Oh! How’s Fisher?” Clint asked, clearly an afterthought.

“He’s critical but stable. The doctors are pretty sure he’s going to make it.”

“Uh, good. That’s good.”

“Yes. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Phil said, the promise somehow making it easier to leave.

“Yeah. Tomorrow. Thanks.”

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Phil dropped Clint’s clothes and books off first thing the next morning, but later in the afternoon he found himself wandering towards the medical wing. He gave in to the the urge
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to drop in on Clint again, and was pleased to see him sitting up in bed with the laptop on a bed tray, a spiral notebook next to it, and a pencil stuck behind his good ear.

“Am I interrupting?” Phil asked.

“No,” said Clint, looking up with a smile, “I was ready to take a break from polynomials anyway.” He put the computer to sleep and closed the lid. “What’s up?”

Phil thought furiously for a moment then decided to be honest.

“Just thought you might like a visitor. And I wanted to see how you were getting with the math.”

“It’s okay. Some of it is kinda weird; like I thought math was all about numbers, but apparently it also has a lot to do with graphs and curved lines. The program is pretty good at explaining with pictures and stuff, though, which helps a lot.”

“If you have trouble with anything, let me know, and I’ll find you a tutor. This isn’t something you have to do by yourself; you’re allowed help.” Phil said it seriously. He didn’t want Clint to think he had to sink or swim on his own.

“Thanks. I’m okay so far, but I’ll let you know if I get in over my head.”

“Good,” Phil nodded, satisfied that Clint would actually say something if he needed help. “Apart from that, how are you?”

“Okay. The ankle has got to the point where it itches like crazy, but starting tomorrow I’ll be allowed up and around on crutches as much as I want. They want me to stick around for a few more days, though, before they release me and I can move back into my apartment.”

“Let me know, I’ll drive you home.”

“Thanks, boss, that’d be great.”

Phil suddenly wished Clint would stop calling him ‘boss’. He knew it was an alternative to the ‘sir’ that nearly everyone else used, but the constant reminder that Clint saw him that way, as his boss rather than his friend, had started to rankle. He wanted… he wanted a lot of things, but right now he wanted Clint to call him ‘Phil’ when they were alone. Well, there were two ways to go about that. He chose the subtle (not cowardly, subtle) one.

“Is there anything else you need, Clint? Anything I can get you?”

“Nah, I’m good. Craving pizza like a sonova bitch, but I can wait a couple of days until I’m home. I’ll be living on take-out for a while, I guess. I won’t be able to cook standing on one leg with crutches. That’s gonna suck.” Clint sighed.

Phil nodded in commiseration. “Okay, well I should probably get back to work. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will, thanks.”

The next day, just before lunchtime, Phil went out to a local pizza place and bought a medium all-dressed, with extra pepperoni, and carried it into the medical ward.

“Oh my god, you are the best friend ever!” Clint exclaimed when Phil put the box on his bed tray and flipped open the lid.

Phil did nothing to hide the smile spreading across his face. Clint grinned happily back at him for a moment before reaching for a slice. Phil felt an unaccustomed warmth blooming in his chest. He loved making Clint happy.

“Are you eating?” Clint said once he’d chewed and swallowed his first mouthful. “Pull up a chair, grab a slice!”

Phil did, and they ate together in companionable silence. When the pizza was finished Clint said, “So, uh, they’re letting me go tomorrow, so, uh, if I could get that lift?”

“Of course. I’ll be leaving around eighteen-hundred, is that okay, or do you want to go earlier?”

“No, that’s fine. It’s not like I’m on any kind of schedule or anything.” Clint made a face at the plastic ‘boot’ encasing his ankle and foot.

“Fine, I’ll see you then.”

Phil assumed he’d be meeting Clint in the medical ward, so he was surprised when there was a crash at his office door at a quarter-to-six, and Clint shouldered his way in dressed in sweats and a t-shirt, on crutches, and with a duffle bag slung precariously over one shoulder and a thick folder full of paper in one hand.

“Hey. Um, don’t rush or anything, I kinda just couldn’t wait to get out of Medical. Besides, I need the practice with these things.” Clint raised one of the crutches and waved it around, neatly missing all the breakable objects in Phil’s office, but also causing the duffle to slide off his shoulder and thump to the floor.

“Shit,” Clint said, looking at the bag with dismay. “I hope I didn’t damage the laptop.”

“I made sure I got you a field-certified one. They’re supposed to be able to take a fall from a second-story window onto cement, so I’m sure it’s fine.” Phil let Clint see his small smile. “Give me a couple of minutes and I’ll be ready to go. And leave that,” he said as Clint struggled to bend down and pick up the duffle while balancing on the crutches. “I’ll get it.”

“I can manage,” Clint said.

“I know you can, but you don’t need to.”

“Yeah, okay,” Clint said, and flopped down onto the sofa with an audible sigh of relief.

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Phil dropped Clint's duffle on his living-room floor and tossed the folder of paperwork onto Clint's coffee table, causing some of the papers inside to slide out.

"What's this?" Phil asked, picking up a flyer and looking at the bold-faced title '*Auditory Implants Explained*'. He flipped the paper around so that Clint could see it.

"Oh, yeah. Dr. Rosenberg came by and talked to me about some more it while I was in Medical." Clint looked down and fiddled with the string on his sweatpants.

"Clint," Phil sat down on the sofa and put the flyer on the table. "I'm sorry I wasn't more patient when you came to me about this before the mission. I was… preoccupied."

"I know," Clint said, looking up. "It's okay."

"Are you… thinking about it?"

"I guess."

"Do you still want to talk it over with me?"

Clint took his arms out of the crutches and leaned them against the table, then flopped down on the sofa next to Phil. "I mean, from what Doc Rosenberg says, it's great. After a while of, you know, adjusting, I could have like 90% hearing back in my bad ear. And they can make the implant so that it picks up SHIELD frequencies as well, so I won't even need to wear a comms unit, it'll all just be there."

"But?" Phil asked softly.

"Well, for one thing, the surgery to install the implant will destroy what hearing I have left in that ear." Clint's face was still, but Phil could see how much the idea scared him. He nodded in understanding, but Clint continued anyway. "I know it's only 30%, but it's something, you know? I don't know if I'm ready to sacrifice that. Plus there's no guarantee the operation will be successful. I mean I'm sure Dr. Rosenberg is a great doctor and all, but the info," Clint gestured at the pamphlet on the coffee table, "says there's a 7% chance that the implant will fail and I'll have no hearing in that ear at all…"

"It's a risk." Phil said evenly, carefully not putting any judgement into his words or tone.

"Yeah. I mean I passed the SHIELD physical because between my good ear and my bad one, I've still got like, 60% normal hearing, which is good enough for field work, just. But if I lose what's left in my bad one…"

"Clint," Phil wanted to reach out, but clasped his hands in his lap instead, and contented himself with turning to face Clint on the sofa. "There will be a place for you in SHIELD even if you are stone deaf. I swear it."

"I… yeah, okay, but doing what? I mean I can't exactly fly jets or be a field operative if I'm deaf."

“Agent Lopez goes into the field regularly.” Phil said mildly. Agent Camila Lopez was almost completely blind.

“Yeah, but she’s some kind of language genius or something. Like, she can tell what school you went to and where your parents are from just by the way you talk.” Clint wasn’t exaggerating much. Camila Lopez was indeed a language savant who spoke several dozen languages fluently and could tell what region someone was from by not only their accent, but also by idiom, even when they were speaking their second (or third, of fourth) language.

“Last time I checked, you don’t need to be able to hear in order to shoot,” Phil said, trying to lighten the atmosphere just a little.

“Yeah, but if I can’t communicate on the comms…”

“Then we’ll get you an interpreter. Or a hearing ear dog. Or a computer. Or whatever it takes. But Clint, I don’t want to force you into a decision. I’m just trying to reassure you that if things go wrong, SHIELD isn’t going to throw you out onto the street. You have my word on that.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks. So if I do decide to go for it, the other thing I need to know is if I want the implant to be my comms too, or if I want to need to wear a comms unit in my other ear, my good ear, during ops. I couldn’t wear it on the side with the implant because of interference, apparently.”

Phil knew how much Clint hated having anything in his good ear, ever. He didn’t even wear both earbuds when he listened to music on his iPod. “Surely you’d be able to switch the SHIELD comms feed off whenever you want?” he said.

“So they say. It would have both a physical and an auditory off button. Meaning I can click my tongue a couple of times for off, or I can push a button behind my ear. But I figure they’ll always be able to switch it back on in an emergency, you know? I mean it only makes sense…”

Phil wanted to argue, to tell Clint that SHIELD would never invade is privacy like that. That he could trust the doctors to only have his best interests at heart… but when he opened his mouth, he couldn’t say the words. Because he knew they weren’t true. “It only makes sense,” he repeated instead.

“I mean, it’s not the end of the world. I’ve pretty much thrown my lot in with SHIELD now. I trust you, and I trust Fury, and that’s enough, I guess.”

Phil had always hoped that he had Clint’s trust, but to hear it now, in so many words, gave him a warm glow. “I can get the blueprints of the implant from R&D, and give you a copy. So that if ever anything happens, you can disable it.” It would mean accessing several files he wasn’t technically authorized to access, but when it came to Clint’s well-being, Phil realized that he was willing to bend the rules more than a little.

Clint looked at him and nodded. “Thanks. So I’m thinking that I’m probably gonna tell Dr. Rosenberg that I’m gonna do it. But, uh, there’s one other thing.” Clint pulled a sheet of

paper from the back of the folder and held it in his hands, looking at it rather than at Phil.

“I don’t have any family except Barney, who doesn’t really count, seeing as he left me for dead and all,” Clint said, looking up at Phil briefly, then back down at the paper in his hands. “So when I originally filled in the SHIELD paperwork I just left the ‘next-of-kin’ space blank. They explained that if anything ever happened, if I got badly hurt and couldn’t say what I wanted, that the doc on duty would just use his best judgement. At the time I figured that was fine, I mean, whatever, you know?”

Phil nodded. He remembered Clint’s attitude when they first started working together, the fatalistic way he never asked for anything, never expected anything.

“But now, uh, well you know me better than anyone. I figure you’d know what I would want. If something like that happened, I mean. So I was wondering if you’d, uh, be willing…” Clint held the form out.

Phil looked down at the piece of paper in his hand and swallowed around the lump in his throat. “You’re asking me to be your medical proxy?”

“I know it’s asking a lot, I mean the responsibility and stuff. And it’s not like we’re… anyway so if you don’t want to that’s fine, I totally understand. I just thought I’d ask…” Clint trailed off and reached to take the paper away. Phil pulled his hand back.

“Clint, I’m honored that you asked me. Of course I’ll sign this for you.”

“Thanks. That’s great, thanks. Uh, so, if something does happen, I don’t wanna be a vegetable hooked up to machines, you know that, right? So just pull the plug.”

Phil had fished a pen out of his inside jacket pocket. He looked up into Clint’s bright, earnest eyes and nodded, “I understand. You have my word.”

“Thanks.” Clint handed him the folder so that he had a surface to write on. He read over the form where Clint had already filled in Phil’s name, SHIELD ID number and clearance level, and relationship status as ‘Colleague’. He signed and carefully dated the bottom of the form, and then handed the folder back to Clint.

“Cool. So I guess I’ll tell Dr. Rosenberg that I’m willing to go ahead with the implant thingy. I mean, since I’m going to be out of action for the next couple of months until I can run on this damn ankle again, now’s the best time. I can heal up from both at the same time, and I don’t need to be able to hear to do my math lessons, so it all works out.”

“Clint, are you sure this is something you want? Something you’re ready to do? There’s no rush, even if the timing is convenient right now.”

“Thanks, but I’ve thought about it and yeah, I mean, my hearing aid is just such a pain and a liability. I’m always worried about it falling out in the middle of a fight or getting wet and shorting out or something. This way, I won’t have to worry about that.”

“Okay, I just want to know that you’re sure.”

“I am. Thanks for looking out for me, boss. It means a lot.”

Phil hid his wince at the word ‘boss’. It meant that no matter how big a stride they’d just made towards a genuine friendship, they weren’t there yet.

“You’re welcome. Now is there anything else you need my help with, or should I get out of your hair and let you re-acquaint yourself with your apartment?”

“Well, I was gonna order pizza, want to stay for that?”

Phil smiled. He most certainly did.

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Ten days later, Phil was again sitting by Clint’s bedside, waiting for him to wake up. He stared at the shaved patch of skin behind Clint’s ear and the neat line of sutures, surprisingly short, but Phil had seen the blueprints for the ultra-high-tech device that the doctors had implanted into Clint’s skull, and it was surprisingly small. Phil thought he gotten all of the nerves and worry out of his system that morning, but apparently the two hours he’d spent at the gym and additional hour at the firing range while Clint was in surgery hadn’t worked all the tension out of him.

‘Besides,’ he told himself as he watched Clint’s chest rise and fall under the thin hospital sheet. ‘It’s not like I can give him anything more than friendship, so it’s pointless to let myself get so emotionally invested…’ But Phil knew he was invested. He’d been invested from the moment he called Clint (who was just ‘Barton’ then) into his office to ask him about his report on the first op they ever did together. He’d been invested when he asked Fury to be Barton’s handler. He’d been invested when he started working to give Clint every opportunity SHIELD could offer… And he was invested now, sitting by Clint’s bedside, waiting for him to wake up from a procedure that had scared him.

There was a twitch in Clint’s face, and his eyes opened. Phil got out of his chair and moved into Clint’s line of sight, knowing he didn’t currently have any hearing in the ear they’d just operated on.

“Hi there, how are you feeling?” Phil spoke a little loudly, and took care to look directly at Clint’s face and enunciate clearly.

“Hey, Phil. What are you doing here?”

Phil’s heart did a somersault at Clint’s use of his first name, and he could feel himself breaking into a stupidly wide smile.

“Just thought you’d like to see a friendly face when you woke up. How does it feel?”

“They musta given me some good painkillers, ‘cause I can’t feel much of anything. My ear’s still there, right?”

“Yes. You’ve got a small incision behind it, two inches at the most. It won’t show at all when your hair grows back.”
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“Yeah, I’m gonna look like a doofus for a while, I guess.”

“You look just fine,” Phil said, and snapped his mouth shut.

“That’s good.”

A nurse bustled in. “You’re awake, excellent! How are you feeling?”

“Okay I guess,” Clint shot a glance at Phil, seemingly for reassurance, and Phil took a step closer to Clint’s bedside, fighting the urge to reach out and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Good. I’ll go tell the surgeon you’re awake. He’ll want to come and check your implant.” The nurse checked Clint’s vitals on the the automatic read-out and then hurried out again.

“Would you stay? While the doc’s here, I mean. So you can help me remember what he said, or ask any questions I don’t think of?” Clint’s face was more open than Phil had ever seen it, and he had to remind himself that Clint was still coming out of anesthetic, and on strong painkillers.

“Of course. I’ll stay as long as you want.”

The smile he got for that twisted in his heart like a knife.

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Over the next few weeks while Clint was recovering from the surgery for the implant and his broken ankle, they saw each other surprisingly often. Clint seemed to find any number of minor details of paperwork to do with his medical leave that he needed to consult Phil about, and Phil shifted his own range schedule so that his practice times lined up with Clint’s, which just happened to be right before lunch. So it was only natural for them to start heading to the cafeteria together. Or sometimes to Phil’s office instead, when the cafeteria was too loud and busy, and eventually they got into the habit of heading out to a local diner on Wednesdays for burgers or pizza.

Clint finished his High School math and, true to his word, Phil booked him into SHIELD’s pilot training courses. Clint was even busier now, between physio for his ankle, time in the lab to adjust and improve his implant, his usual range time, and the ground school portion of his pilot’s training, but he still managed to meet up with Phil for lunch regularly. Sometimes Phil dragged Sitwell along, and sometimes Clint invited Diaz to join them.

So Phil wasn’t completely surprised when Clint showed up at his apartment door one evening.

“Hi, uh, sorry, I guess I should have called first to make sure it was okay to drop by,” Clint said from the doorway. He was holding something partly hidden behind his back.

“It’s fine, I was just queuing something up on the TiVo. Come on in.”

Clint kicked off his boots at the door and stepped a few paces into Phil’s living room, then stopped.
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“Uh, this is for you,” he said, holding out the liquor store bag he’d been hiding.

Phil took the bag from him and looked into it. He gave a low whistle as he pulled out a box that contained a bottle of 20-year-old single malt scotch.

“I hope it’s the right kind. The guy at the store asked me what you liked, and I just told him which bottles I remembered seeing.” Clint gestured awkwardly at the part of a bookshelf that served as Phil’s liquor cabinet.

“It’s fantastic, Clint. I’ve tasted it a few times, but I’ve never bought myself a bottle. This wasn’t cheap, why…” He trailed off as Clint held out a folded piece of paper. For an instant Phil was terrified that Clint was resigning and that the bottle was a goodbye present.

“It’s, uh, a thank you. For helping me with this.”

Phil unfolded the paper. It was a copy of a certificate stating that Clinton Francis Barton had completed all the requirements of a GED.

“The math tutorial software you gave me had some information about the GEDs, so I checked it out and realized that I’d done everything except some of the social studies stuff. It, uh, wasn’t hard to find the books for that and it made a nice break from algebra. So last week I went down to a test center and sat the exam and I, uh, passed.” Clint’s ears were a delicate shade of pink, but his eyes were bright.

“This is fantastic! Clint I’m so proud of you.” Phil realized that might sound condescending, but Clint turned even more pink and looked at the floor.

“Yeah, well you had me do like 80% of the curriculum for SHIELD stuff, so I figured it was kinda your plan.”

It had been, but Phil hadn’t really wanted Clint to know that, though he should have realized that Clint would figure it out eventually.

“So anyway, thanks,” Clint said, looking back up and finally meeting Phil’s eyes.

Phil wanted more than anything in the world to put his arms around Clint and hug him tightly. “Well, this calls for a celebration,” Phil said instead, handing the copy of Clint’s GED certificate back to him. He opened the box and put the bottle of amber liquid on the coffee table.

Clint accepted the small measure Phil poured into a glass for him, and waited while Phil poured his own drink and corked the bottle.

“Congratulations,” Phil said, not trusting himself with anything else.

“Thank you.”

Phil clinked his glass against Clint’s and took a sip.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he said, and then smiled at Clint. “You don’t have to pretend to like it, I won’t be offended.”

“It’s okay. It’s not as bad as the stuff my dad used to drink, anyway. Is it, uh, supposed to taste like a campfire?”

“Smoky? Yes, it’s supposed to. Sit down, I’ll get you a beer.”

“Um, I didn’t mean to crash your evening. I just wanted to tell you, and say thank you.”

“It’s fine. But if you have plans…” Phil said, desperately hoping he didn’t.

“No, no plans.” Clint flopped down on Phil’s sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. Phil grabbed two beers from the fridge, put the bottle of Scotch away, and then joined him.

“How’s the flight training going?” Phil asked, and Clint launched into an excited and detailed description of the past few day’s lessons.

That led to Phil telling a story about a helicopter rescue when he’d been a Ranger, which got Clint onto some of the circus tricks he’d done with flaming arrows.

Two hours and another beer each later, Phil yawned, and Clint took his feet down off the coffee table.

“Right, I’d better head out. I’ve got more flight training tomorrow.”

“And I have an early meeting with Fury,” Phil said regretfully. He followed Clint to the door.

Clint stuffed his feet into his boots and then squatted down to fiddle with the laces for a moment. When he stood back up, there was something in his expression that Phil didn’t recognize.

“This, uh, this was fun.”

“Yes,” said Phil with a warm smile. “It was.”

“Phil, a couple of years ago, I made a hash of asking you to go out with me. If I asked again now, would I get a different answer?”

Phil’s heart clenched tight in his chest, and he had to force himself to drag in a breath before speaking. “No Clint, I’m sorry.”

“Just thought I’d ask,” Clint said, looking at the floor and turning to leave.

“Clint,” Phil reached out and grabbed him by the arm to stop him, then let go as soon as Clint had turned back to face him. “I care about you a great deal, but not in that way,” he said, lying outright to Clint for what he desperately hoped would be the last time.

“Okay,” Clint said, but Phil could see the disappointment in his eyes. “I get that. Friends, then?”

“Friends, absolutely,” Phil said, and, feeling a little foolish, stuck out his hand to shake.

Clint smiled widely at him though, and gave him a firm handshake. “Cool,” he said. “See you at the office.”

“Yes.”

Once Clint had left, Phil poured himself another small measure from the very expensive bottle of Scotch, and sat back down on the sofa with it. “Friends,” he said quietly to himself, and drank.

Chapter 4: The Fourth Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The Fourth Year

“How much damage are they doing?” Phil had arrived in the command centre at a run, and skidded to a stop beside Maria Hill and Nick Fury, both of whom were staring at SHIELD security camera footage of… things.

“Hard to say. The weapons seem to be some sort of laser, but not like anything we’ve seen before. Each individual shot doesn’t do much on it’s own, but they’re attacking in clusters, possibly formations of some kind. It probably won’t take long for a concentrated barrage to break a window,” Maria answered as they watched the things flying around the outside of the building.

“Casualties?” was Phil’s next question.

“Two so far, burns to a couple of guards who tried to engage them on the rooftop,” Fury answered this time. “They were able to get under cover, though, when it became obvious they couldn’t hit the things, whatever they are. I’m scrambling the Quinjets.” He nodded to Maria who moved to a terminal and started issuing quiet orders.

“You think that will work?” Phil asked.

“Hell, I don’t know what will work. All I know is that these things move almost too fast to see, and I’m hoping the targeting computers on the jets will be able to keep up with them.” Nick Fury was scowling at the scene on the video screen. SHIELD had had any number of bizarre enemies over the years, and thus was equipped to deal with all kinds of attacks. But a swarm of flying metal balls the size of grapefruit shooting tiny lasers? That was a new one. One they didn’t seem to have adequate defenses against.

“Still no word on where they’re from, who made them, what they’re trying to do?” Phil asked.

“Nothing. Here let’s see what the Quinjets can do,” Fury said as the aircraft came into view.

For an instant Phil wondered if Clint might be one of the pilots, but he knew Clint hadn’t quite finished his certification yet, and so wouldn’t be flying sorties unless there was some kind of dire emergency. Which this wasn’t… yet. They watched for a few minutes as the Quinjets tried to fire at the small flying balls, but it quickly became apparent that they were worse than useless.

For one thing, the vast majority of the orbs were so close the the building that the Quinjets couldn’t target them without aiming at the building itself. And it was obvious that the targeting computers were not up to the task. Coulson, Hill, and Fury watched as the jets fired at where an orb had just been, missing every time.

An alarm sounded. Hill turned to look at a display. “Sir, we have reports that they’ve broken through a window on the top floor and are targeting our people there.”

“Evacuate the floor and lock it down. Once we’re sure all our people are out, try engaging the fire suppression. Okay people, at this point I’m willing to hear any ideas, no matter how far-fetched.”

Phil took a breath. “Sir, I have a suggestion.”

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Clint was hanging around the Quinjet bay, just in case they called on him to fly, but he was watching the action unfold on the screens and he could see as well as everyone else that the jets were useless against the flying silver softballs. His comms chirped softly in his ear and he clicked his tongue to open the channel.

“Barton here.”

“Barton suit up, grab your weapons, and head for the roof on the double. I’ll meet you there.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Clint said, and took off at a run. If Phil said ‘on the double,’ it meant as fast as he could easily manage. Since he was already wearing half of his field-suit, it didn’t take him very long to grab the rest from his locker. At the weapons lock-up, Coulson had obviously already radioed in advance, because there was a rifle, two handguns, and a satchel full of ammunition waiting for him.

“Give me my bow and quiver, too,” Clint said, and the agent looked like he was going to argue for a second but then thought better of it, and handed Clint his bow case and a quiver full of arrows. It was a little tough to carry everything, but he only needed to manage as far as the elevator. There was a priority override there too, with a junior agent standing next to an open elevator door, waving him in.

“He’s on his way up, sir,” Clint heard the young man say as the doors slid closed. Clint dropped everything on the floor, then finished getting dressed, strapped on his holsters, and secured the handguns. His quiver went over one shoulder and the satchel full of ammo over the other. He just had time to grab the rifle case in one hand and his bow case in the other when the doors opened.

There was a crowd of people standing off to one side. The evacuation klaxon was sounding. Clint looked around for Coulson and spotted Sitwell, who waved him over.

“Coulson’s waiting for you up on the roof.”

Clint jogged up the stairs and found Phil standing just inside the access door to the roof.

“You want me to try to shoot them?” Clint asked.

“It’s worth a try.”
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“Yeah, okay. Let me take a look.” Clint poked his head out the door. The silver orbs were zipping around the windows of the top floor, but a group were concentrating their fire on one of the antenna arrays on the roof. As Clint watched, a barrage of tiny laser beams cut through one of the stanchions and made the tower creak and list a little to the side. He pulled his head back in.

“Let someone know they’re attacking the antenna array. We may lose comms,” he said to Phil, who nodded.

“Can you do it?”

“What, hit them? Hell yeah!” Clint grinned widely and unholstered one of the pistols. He checked the magazine and put a half-dozen spare clips into the pockets of his cargo pants. Then he stepped through the door. Handguns weren’t his favorite weapon, but he was as accurate with them as with anything else. And swinging a rifle around after these things… Though maybe a shotgun, like shooting into a flock of birds… He sighted and fired. The orb he had hit wobbled, then took it’s place back in formation, firing at another stanchion of the antenna array.

‘Maybe I just winged it the first time.’ Clint sighted and fired again. He saw the orb wobble, and was pretty sure he could even see a mark or a dent where his bullet had hit. He fired six more times, emptying his clip before ducking back through the door.

“I’m hitting them all right, but they’re not going down. Dunno what they’re made of, but whatever it is it’s crazy tough. The bullets are denting it a little, but not punching through.”

“Armor-piercing rounds, like with the lizards? Or incendiary rounds, maybe?” Phil asked.

“Maybe,” Clint said. “Let me try something.” He quickly got his bow out of its case and strung it, then selected an arrow from his quiver. Phil looked a little skeptical, but didn’t say anything. Clint just grinned up at him, then stepped through the door. He spent a minute just watching the orbs, getting a sense for their movement patterns. Then he raised his bow, sighted, drew, and fired. He scored a direct hit on one of the orbs. It exploded with a bright flash and took its two or three closest neighbors with it.

“Gotcha!” Clint said, and ducked back into the roof access hatch. “Explosive arrows work on them. I hit one, and it took a few others out with it. Do you want me to try and EMP arrow, or keep going with these?” he asked as he pulled the three remaining explosive arrows out of his quiver.

“The EMP will knock out the communications tower they’re attacking.” Phil said, “Let me check in and get the big picture. For now, keep at it.”

“Okay, if you could get someone to pick up the rest of the explosive arrows from the armory, and run them up here…”

“On it,” Phil said, and issued quiet orders into his comms. Clint nodded, and ducked back outside.

Hitting the flying orbs was all about anticipating where they'd be 5 milliseconds from now, and firing at that spot. Clint tried to let his mind go blank, to see just the patterns, and let his reflexes do the rest. He fired again, and took out a few more orbs. Their pattern changed. Instead of concentrating on the stanchions of the antenna tower, a large group (squadron?) started to fly around the rooftop. Clint thought it looked like a standard grid search pattern. They were further apart, too, which meant he'd only be able to hit one at a time now, so he concentrated on the ones that were still swarmed around the base of the tower. He fired again and out of the corner of his eye saw the grid pattern change, and start to home in on his location. He used his last arrow on the swarm near the tower, then retreated behind the door.

"It's going to take some time to re-route all communications off that tower, so hold off on the EMP for now. Someone is on their way up with more explosive arrows. It looks like the ones that got in on the top floor are heading for the roof."

"Great. I think I've pissed them off. They kinda look like they're trying to get a bead on me," Clint said.

"Are they behaving as if they're being remote-controlled from somewhere? If we can track back to the source somehow, we can shut them all down at once."

"Hard to tell, but I don't think so. After I started firing, a group of them started to fly in what looked like a standard grid search, as if they were looking for me. Or for the source of the arrows, anyway." Clint heard footsteps on the stairs and a junior agent came running up with two quivers over her shoulder, each holding 20 explosive-tipped arrows.

"This is everything they had in weapons stores, sir," the agent said, looking from Phil to Clint.

"Thank you Agent…" Phil said

"Grondkowski, sir. Agent Sitwell asked me to tell you he's on his way up." Sure enough Jasper came up the stairs, but Clint didn't wait around to find out what he had to say. If it was something he needed to know, Phil'd tell him. He stepped back out and started shooting flying silver softballs out of the sky.

He'd destroyed a half-dozen more when Phil's voice came over the comms. "How's it going out there, Barton?"

"Okay, boss, but they've figured out that if they stay further apart, I can only get one at a time. I can't get a good count on how many of them there are, but I get the feeling I'm not going to have enough arrows. Ow. Shit."

"What's wrong?" Phil's voice was full of concern.

"Nothing. I'm fine. One of the little bastards just tagged me."

"Tagged you? What do you mean tagged you? Never mind. I'm coming out." Clint shot another arrow and watched another silver ball explode, then heard Phil behind him.

“Jasper’s with me. I’m going to step around your to right side,” Phil said, announcing his move so that he wouldn’t get in the way of Clint’s shooting.

“Yeah, fine.” Clint stopped watching the orbs’ flight patterns and instead started watching Phil’s back. He didn’t think they were going to suddenly attack, but he didn’t want to find out too late if they did.

“You’re cut,” Phil said, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and pressing it to the scratch on Clint’s shoulder.

“They’ve got lasers, yeah?”

“You mean one of them did this? Why didn’t you tell me you were being attacked?” Phil asked sharply. After a bad mission a year ago, Phil had extracted a promise that Clint would always report if he was attacked or injured.

“I don’t think I was, actually. They seem to be aiming at my bow and mostly missing. It’s almost like they’re having trouble locking onto it or something. But I’m just guessing, based on what I’m seeing. They had no trouble aiming at the antenna, but they seem to only hit me by accident. Duck!” Clint yelled, and Phil ducked, and Clint shot a silver softball that was flying towards them.

Clint heard the sound of gunfire from behind him.

“Shit, if I wasn’t watching you do it with my own eyes, I’d never believe you can actually hit these things,” said Jasper from behind him.

“We need a better plan,” Phil said. “You’re too exposed like this.”

“Well I’m gonna run out of arrows eventually.” Clint’s stomach grumbled it’s protest at the fact that he’d missed lunch. He could hear Phil talking softly into his comms, but kept his focus on the orbs. He wasn’t going to let Phil, or Jasper for that matter, get hurt. Occasionally there were a couple of shots from behind him, when one of the orbs got too close. It didn’t do much except maybe ‘distract’ the closest orb a little. Clint was developing a theory, but he needed a lot more data before he was willing to say anything about it, even to Phil.

“What’s the range of those lasers?” Jasper asked.

“Uh, a couple of feet, maybe a meter. No more than that, as far as I can tell.”

“So if we can find a way to keep them a few feet away from him…” Jasper was saying to Phil. Clint shot another orb. He was down to six explosive arrows. He knew without checking, having kept count in his head like he always did when he was in a fight. The door behind him banged open, but Clint didn’t flinch because he trusted Phil (and Jasper, for that matter) to have his back.

“Here you go sir,” Agent Grondkowski’s voice again, behind him. “This is everything they had in the labs. Agents Booker and Hwang are already there, helping to make more, and they’re calling in everyone else they can think of.”

Clint heard the agent being dismissed. “I’ve got another dozen arrows for you here, and they’re making more as fast as they can down in the lab.”

“Yeah, I heard, thanks. Put them in one of the empty quivers, will you? So I can switch when I run out?”

Phil’s answer was lost in the noise of the door again, and Clint had to take a deep, steadying breath to focus his concentration back on the zipping silver grapefruit. Except then Phil spoke up.

“Clint, we want to try something. Agents Phan and Sanchez are going to try to keep the orbs further away from you. But if they’re getting in your way, and you can’t shoot with them there, let me know, and we’ll try something else.”

“Okay, boss.” Clint was getting tired. And he was hungry. And thirsty. A silver softball zipped towards the tip of his bow and he smacked it out of the way like an angry wasp, then had to turn his head to track it. It wobbled and flew away.

Two agents he didn’t know were spreading out in a ‘V’ in front of him. One was a short, wiry Asian man, the other was a tall, muscular Hispanic woman. Both were dressed in standard SHIELD sparring gear and holding long wooden poles. Clint watched as they bowed to each other, then to him, and then started to… dance.

Okay, he knew it wasn’t a dance, but it was beautiful and graceful as they sidestepped out of the path of the orbs and swung their poles, which were bamboo, Clint realized, around their heads. At first he thought they were just there to act as a kind of a shield, to stop the orbs coming in from those vectors, giving him less to worry about. Then the Asian man, Phan, Clint presumed, connected with one of the silver balls with a loud thwack. It shot back about ten feet before coming to a wobbly halt, then flying off again. Behind him, Jasper cheered.

“Way to go, Tim!”

Tim Phan gave Sitwell a quick nod, then went back to swinging his pole. ‘This just might work,’ thought Clint. He settled himself again, letting his eyes soften and take in the whole scene. Tracking the movements of the orbs and the two agents and their sticks. He nocked and drew and fired. And again. And again.

“Give me a hand with the next quiver, will you?” Clint called, and felt Phil step up close behind him.

“Yes, but I’ve got a Camelbak for you as well. I thought you might be thirsty.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Phil. Here, right arm first.” He held his arm back and let Phil slip the strap over his shoulder. Then he transferred his bow to his other hand so Phil could do the left strap. As he moved his bow back, Phil adjusted the drinking tube and the clip that held it in place at his shoulder.

“There, how’s that?” Phil’s voice was soft and steady in his ear. Clint turned his head and took a sip. Phil had had the Camelback filled with cold Gatorade, rather than water. It was

heavenly.

“It’s fantastic, boss, thanks.” He took one more long swallow, then quickly knocked an arrow to shoot an orb that was heading for Sanchez’s back.

“You’re welcome. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat a horse.” He’d been shooting for over half an hour, probably closer to forty minutes. He could shoot for hours if he needed to, but the concentration and focus, not to mention the physical effort, used a lot of energy.

“Here.” Phil had broken off a piece of PowerBar and held it over Clint’s shoulder, near the canteen’s nozzle. All Clint had to do was turn his head to take it from him. He chewed and swallowed, and Phil fed him another piece. Clint tried to ignore the intimacy of it. Of Phil standing warmly at his back and feeding him bites like a baby bird. Of the fact that Phil’s fingertips brushed his lips when he took the morsel. Of the fact that Phil had made sure to get him blue Gatorade and a chocolate-raspberry PowerBar, his favorites.

Phil didn’t mean anything by it. Nothing more than being a good friend, and a good handler who was taking care of one of his people. Clint told himself that as he quietly said, “Thanks Phil.”

Now that he had the two agents with sticks to keep some of the orbs occupied, he didn’t need the wall at his back, and being out in the open gave him a lot more freedom of movement. He shot three more of the flying saucers (even though they weren’t saucer-shaped, that’s what he’d started thinking of them as), and Phan scored another blow to one, knocking it towards the edge of the roof. This time Clint spun and shot the thing while it was still recovering from the blow. He heard a cheer behind him and glanced over to see that there was now a small crowd by the door. Phil and Jasper were there, as well as a couple of the science people, and a guy Clint didn’t know with a video camera. Okay, so they were documenting this attack or whatever it was. Clint put the group out of his mind, and went back to work.

After a few more minutes, the three of them fell into a rhythm together, or rather, Clint was able to match the rhythm that Phan and Sanchez had, and so now they worked seamlessly as a team, like a group of well-trained acrobats. Phan and Sanchez spun and parried, their sticks always moving, creating a safe zone for themselves and Clint. And Clint picked off the orbs one by one. It was a slow business, because they were still small, and fast, and he needed to make every single shot count. He didn’t know how fast the guys down in the lab could make more explosive arrows, but it surely wasn’t as fast as he was shooting them, so he couldn’t afford to waste a single one.

Two left in the current quiver. He shot one, took a couple of steps back towards the door, and was about to call out when he saw Phil pick up a full quiver and move slowly towards him. Phil was counting too, of course he was. He nocked his last arrow, waited, shot, then dropped the empty quiver.

Phil helped him on with a new, full one. He knocked an arrow immediately, just in case one of the orbs got by Phan and Sanches.

“You’re doing a great job, Clint,” Phil said quietly once the full quiver was properly settled on his back.

“Thanks.”

“Want some more to eat?”

“Yeah, please.”

Phil fed him some more pieces of PowerBar. “How are you feeling?” he asked between bites.

Clint finished chewing. “Okay. I’m gonna be fucking sore tomorrow, but I’m fine, really.”

“You’ll tell me if you’re not.”

“Yeah, promise.”

Clint felt Phil’s small nod at his back. He forced himself to step away, to get back to work.

It took another hour and two more quivers of arrows, but finally, there were only three of the whizzing silver softballs left.

Clint took out one. One of the remaining two seemed to be uncertain of what to do. As it hovered in the middle of the roof, Sanchez whacked it and Clint shot it. The last one also seemed undecided for a moment, and then shot straight upwards.

“Oh no you don’t,” Clint said, and aimed, bending backwards to get the shot off. The silver ball exploded over their heads and a cheer went up. Clint straightened up to find Phan and Sanchez bowing to each other, and then to him. He bowed back, then turned to the small crowd gathered by the door and gave another, exaggerated performer’s bow.

“Thanks, folks, I’m here all week, don’t forget to tip your waiter.” Then he smiled a genuine, tired smile as Phil came towards him with his bow case and a small styrofoam container from the cafeteria. He stowed his bow, and then scarfed the chocolate brownie.

“Thanks, Phil.”

“You were great,” Phil said quietly, and Clint gave him a sidelong look. Phil had never said anything like that before. He was lavish with his praise, and Clint had gotten used to hearing “good job, and “well done,” but this time Phil’s tone held… real admiration.

Clint fought back his instinct to brush off the compliment with a stupid joke, but he didn’t know what to say. By then other people were crowding around him, slapping him on the back and telling him how awesome he was.

“Hey, I had help,” he said, and when the crush didn’t lessen. “Sorry, guys, but I really need to take a piss, and then hit the showers.” That got a laugh and the crowd parted.

“Debrief in thirty minutes,” Phil called after him as he jogged down the stairs. Clint flipped him off. He’d be there, though. Of course he would. On time, even.

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The official debrief had taken about an hour, and was only that short because most of the answers to the myriad of questions were: “I don’t know.”

No one knew where the flying orbs had come from, what they were trying to do, or why. The lab had collected a bunch of fragments off the rooftop, but was still analyzing them, trying to piece together enough of one of them to figure out what the hell it was even made of, not to mention what it was.

Fury scowled through it, but at the end said, “Good work people. There’s pizza and beer in the common room for everyone who was involved in this… whatever it was.”

As they filed out of the conference room, Phil turned towards his office.

“Hey, aren’t you coming?” Clint asked.

“I have work to do.” It wasn’t just that. Watching Clint on the rooftop had been… trying. He’d been intelligent, competent, athletic, graceful… beautiful. Phil had been mesmerized watching him. Mesmerized and powerfully attracted. It didn’t help that he knew Clint was interested in him, too. Phil needed some space to talk himself down, and to bury his feelings.

“Aw, come on, Phil. It’s nothing that won’t wait. Come for a piece of pizza, at least. I know you didn’t get lunch because you were up on that roof with me the whole time.” Clint was looking at him imploringly, and so against his better judgement, Phil followed.

It soon became apparent that pizza and beer weren’t the only attractions in the lounge. One of the techs had a laptop plugged into the tangle of cables under the big-screen TV and was testing sound levels.

Clint made a bee-line for the food table, and grabbed two slices of pizza on a paper plate and a plastic cup full of roasted peanuts. Phil saw Jasper hand him a beer, and then look around.

“Phil, come get something to eat! And drink,” Jasper called, waving him over.

Phil accepted a slice of pizza from a junior agent and a beer from Jasper. Someone grabbed Clint by the arm and ushered him over to the sofa in front of the TV, where Phan and Sanchez were already sitting.

“Okay, so… Quiet down people. Grab your drinks and pay attention here,” one of the techs was shouting over the din, which lowered by a couple of decibels. “So we had a damned impressive display from some of our agents today, and we recorded it for posterity. We also got a bunch of footage from our surveillance cameras, and a buddy of mine in the electronic intelligence department may or may not have, ahem… borrowed some news footage as well.” There was laughter at that.

“Anyway, this is just a rough edit, but I thought our three valiant heroes should get a chance to see what they looked like up on the roof this afternoon.”
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Phil was very grateful when someone dimmed the lights. It meant he could fade back, find a place against a wall, near the door. He wasn't feeling anxious, but he knew he might need to leave in a hurry, and wanted to be able to do so without anyone noticing.

The video started to play. There was no title card, just a black screen that changed abruptly to SHIELD's surveillance camera footage of the orbs whizzing around outside the building, then flying around inside the abandoned top floor. Fire suppression kicked in, and the orbs left through the broken window as the floor filled with foam. The cameras went blank, and the view changed to the rooftop. The cameras had automatically tracked the movement of the orbs as best they could, and homed in on the group that was firing their lasers (or whatever they were) at the antenna tower. Then the camera moved, tracking Clint as he came through the door in a defensive crouch, weapon raised. There was a cheer in the room, and a couple of raspberries blown in Clint's direction as well.

Then gasps as Clint fired at and hit the orbs with his pistol.

"How the fuck did you do that?" demanded one of the agents standing near him, indignantly.

"Hey, they don't call me the World's Greatest Marksman for nothing," Clint turned a shit-eating grin on the man. Phil didn't blame him. Not many people understood how good Clint truly was, because his marksmanship scores on the SHIELD range didn't come close to describing what he could actually do. 'This, though,' Phil thought as the surveillance camera footage showed Clint disappearing through the door, then coming back out a moment later with his bow…

There was another ragged cheer as Clint took out the first orb with an explosive arrow. The cameras tracked him through three more shots, then the video footage jumped ahead to Phan and Sanchez's arrival on the roof. Their formal bow got a couple of giggles, but, as Phil had been watching the first time around, the crowd in the common room were soon mesmerized by the beauty and grace of the three agents working in harmony.

The footage changed again, to the full color steadicam footage shot by the agent from records. Now there were close-ups of Clint drawing his bow, arm and shoulder muscles bulging. Of Phan's perfectly calm and still face while he swung his bamboo pole faster than the camera could follow. Of Sanchez stepping lightly to the side to let an orb whizz past her head, then catching it on the back-swing of her staff.

There was more cheering and a smattering of applause. Then Phil pulled in a sharp breath as he saw himself come into the frame. He had realized the camera was there at the time, of course, but in the thick of the battle his focus had been on Clint and the two other agents. The footage showed him helping Clint on with a new quiver full of arrows, then the camera zoomed in until it framed a head-and-shoulders close up of himself and Clint as he spoke a few quiet words in Clint's ear, and fed him a few bites of PowerBar. The intimacy of it was palpable to him, even on video, and Phil wondered what Clint thought of the images.

"Woah! Looks like Agent Coulson's got a hard-on for Hawkeye!" snickered Willis, a junior agent that Phil knew slightly, but had never worked with. There were a couple of other snickers and a little uncomfortable laughter from the room, and Phil was about to try to slip

out unnoticed, when he saw Clint take the peanut that he had been about to pop into his mouth and throw it with a surprising amount of force at Willis' head.

"Ow! What the fuck was that for?" said Willis, rubbing his forehead.

"For being a dick, obviously," said Tyrone Booker from where he was standing behind Clint. There was more laughter at that. On the screen, Phil stepped out of the frame, and Clint went back to shooting the orbs. The rest of the footage was thankfully abbreviated, but the cameraman had managed to catch a couple of spectacular shots of Clint firing in one direction while looking in another, and of Phan and Sanchez batting the orbs back several feet, only to have Clint blow them up before they could regain equilibrium. A wild cheer went up when Clint destroyed the last orb, and the three victorious agents got an enthusiastic round of applause from the group.

"I'd like to remind everyone that all the agents in the explosives lab worked very hard and very fast at short notice to keep Agent Barton supplied with arrows, and a number of other agents provided invaluable support," Phil said from his place by the wall.

"Hear, hear!" said Clint, and led a round of applause for the support staff.

Phil was about to go over and speak to Clint, but just then Ty Booker leaned down, put his arm around Clint's shoulders, and whispered something into his ear. Clint grinned widely and turned to whisper back, leaning into Ty's chest. Phil felt an overwhelming stab of jealousy, and told himself not to be stupid. Clint deserved to have whatever companionship he wanted, with whomever he wanted. Phil watched them whisper back and forth for a minute more, taking in all the subtle signs of mutual interest, then he straightened his shoulders, dropped his paper plate in the garbage, and quietly slipped out of the room.

He went home, had a glass of the scotch that Clint had given him as a thank you present, went to bed, and slept badly.

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The next morning Clint appeared at Phil's office door carrying a 4-hole tray with two cups of coffee and two bags containing pastries.

"Hey, Phil. I brought you some of the good stuff from that bakery on 5th," he said, putting a cup of coffee and an apple-cheese Danish on the corner of Phil's desk.

"You didn't need to do that, Clint."

"I know, but I wanted to. Is it okay if I hang out here while I write my after-action from yesterday?" Clint asked, even though he'd already flopped down on the sofa.

Phil wanted to tell him no, it wasn't. But he didn't have any good reason to. Clint was his friend, and did his paperwork sitting on Phil's office sofa more often than not, these days. So Phil waved an obliging hand, and Clint, after setting his own coffee and Danish on the coffee table, ensconced himself in the corner of the sofa and dug his laptop out of his bag.
~~~~~~

“Did you have a nice evening?” Phil asked in what he hoped was only a mildly curious tone. He shouldn’t be asking. He didn’t want to know. Or he did. If Clint was involved with someone, with a fellow agent, then Phil, as his handler, should know that. Or that’s what he told himself, anyway.

“Yeah, I, uh… yeah, it was good.” Clint had a sheepish grin on his face.

Phil purposely kept his eyes on his computer screen and his tone perfectly neutral as he said, “I was under the impression that Agent Booker was married.”

“Yeah, he is, which sucks.” Clint sounded so regretful that Phil looked over at him with an eyebrow raised. “He, uh, he and his wife have, um, I guess you’d call it an arrangement? He had a word for it. Poly-something.”

“Polyamory,” Phil said.

“Yeah, that’s right. He said it meant he was allowed to, uh, sleep with someone else; that she was okay with it. I gotta say, I was kinda skeptical at first when he explained it to me, but Ty’s a good guy. I mean, I’ve known him for a couple of years, and this was… well, I didn’t think he’d lie about something like that, you know? So he offered to call his wife so I could talk to her, and that was an awkward conversation, let me tell you. But it was cool with her, and so Ty came back to my place and, er… well, you know. It was pretty great.” Clint heaved a huge sigh.

“Then why don’t you seem happy about it?”

“Because it can’t be a thing. He’s married. I mean it’s all well and good to have a fun night, but he’s committed to his wife, and I’d only ever be someone on the side. That’s not what I want. I want a real relationship, with someone who really cares about me.” Clint sighed again. “But it doesn’t look like that’s gonna happen any time soon. Not with having to pretend to be a construction worker just to get a date.”

Phil’s heart clenched at the longing in Clint’s voice. He wished he could tell Clint how much he cared about him. How much he wished things were different. How much he wanted… Phil slowly and silently took a deep breath. And then a sip of coffee.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly when he was sure he could speak without his voice cracking.

“Thanks. I’ll get over it. Back in the saddle, and all that. So, have the science folks gotten any closer to figuring out what the hell those silver balls I spent yesterday shooting were?”

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Clint opened the folder labeled ‘*Level 6 Eyes Only*’ in big red letters and whistled.

“Okay, boss, you weren’t kidding when you said we were going after a big fish.”

“You’ve heard of her, then?”
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“Hell, yeah. When I was still, uh, freelance, you’d hear a whisper every now and then. Some people didn’t even believe she actually existed, that she was just some kind of scare story or fairy-tale, but I knew someone who knew someone who’d hired her, once, and I think he was legit, so…”

“She’s assassinated three people in the last two years at the behest of HYDRA. She’s too dangerous to leave at large.”

“Has she ever killed one of our people?”

“Not that we know of, but it’s probably just a matter of time.”

“Or she has rules. When I… I mean, I didn’t just take any job that was offered to me.”

“I know, that’s why SHIELD thought you were worth recruiting.”

“And she’s not?”

“You think there’s any chance she’d say yes?”

Clint thought about it. When Fury had made him the offer, he was on the run from the FBI and the mob. He’d known his days were numbered, and he didn’t have any other options. SHIELD had been a way out… and a way to maybe make up for some of the bad stuff he’d done. He looked at the blurry photo of Natalia Romanova, aka Natasha Romanoff, aka The Black Widow. Was there any chance she’d be in the same boat he had been in? Not fucking likely.

“Probably not,” Clint said.

“It’s going to be a difficult op. We’ve been setting it up, carefully, quietly, for the last couple of months. We’re going through three cut-outs, because if she smells a hint of SHIELD she won’t even turn up for the drop.”

“That’s the plan? She turns up for a drop for a job and I take her out?”

“That’s the plan. Problem?”

Clint shook his head. It seemed kind of… cold luring her to her death like that; but it was no different than the half-dozen other straight-up assassination missions he’d done in the three years he’d been with SHIELD.

A week later he found himself looking at Natalia Romanova again, this time through the scope of his suppressed Blaser rifle (shooting someone with an arrow was harder to cover up in the middle of a city square). He had been in his perch, crouched in the window of an abandoned apartment building, since before dawn. He hadn’t moved a muscle since he’d spotted Romanova’s red hair coming down a side street that led into the square.

She walked slowly into range, and turned towards the doorway of another abandoned building, where the drop had been set up.

"Coulson, target confirmed. I have the shot."

"Take the shot, Agent Barton." Phil was always formal when they were on an assassination assignment, and Clint liked it that way. It seemed more… respectful. Romanova stepped into the doorway and Clint prepared to shoot. But instead of bending down to pick up the package, she turned and looked straight at him, as if she knew he was there.

And that's when he saw her eyes.

He knew the expression in them. He recognized it. She was ready to die. She knew he was there, and she knew he was going to shoot her, and she was just going to stand there and let him do it, but he was going to have to look into her eyes as he did it. Eyes that held so much pain…

"Coulson." Clint didn't know what he was going to say.

"Problem Agent?"

"Yeah, I… Coulson I… I need you to trust me. I know you kinda do. You always have even right from the beginning even though I never asked you to. Until now. I'm asking now, Phil. Trust me on this, okay?"

Clint was putting his rifle down as he spoke, and throwing a tattered jean jacket from his go bag on over his tac suit.

"Barton, what's going on?"

"I can't… I just need to do this. Trust me, Phil. Please." Clint heard Phil's exhale through the comm link, and he could imagine his handler crossing his arms tightly across his chest the way he did when he was stressed.

"Agent Barton, if there's a reason you can't complete this mission–"

Clint clicked his tongue to turn the comm link off. "Sorry Phil," he said quietly to the empty room, then sprinted down the stairs.

He was just in time to catch a glimpse of Romavona's hair as she disappeared around a corner. He followed. His gut instinct, the one that had recognized the look in her eyes, the one that made him turn his back on the best friend he'd ever had, told him that she would lead him to somewhere that she felt safe. Safe enough, anyway.

Sure enough, after twenty minutes of twists and turns through back alleys, Clint was creeping down a rickety set of stairs into a dark basement. As his foot touched the bottom step, he felt the blade of a knife pressing against his throat.

"I could have taken the shot. I didn't."

"That's supposed to be a reason for me not to kill you?" Her voice held the trace of an accent.

"I guess."

“Why are you here?”

“Because you were going to let me kill you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you were going to let me.”

There was a harsh sound that might have been a laugh, and the blade at his throat disappeared. “Don’t make any sudden moves, I can still kill you where you stand.”

Clint leaned back against the wall and spread his hands out in front of himself.

“And don’t think I am so naive as to believe that you are unarmed.”

“Of course.”

“Again, why are you here?” She said. She seemed relaxed, but Clint could see the tension under her skin.

“To try to talk you into joining SHIELD.” That got the maybe-a-laugh noise again. “I’m serious. I know we were trying to kill you just now, but that’s only because my boss was sure that it was useless to make you an offer. But I know better.”

“What do you think you know?”

“That you’re tired. Tired of running, tired of always looking over your shoulder. Tired of having to do the things you do to stay alive. Tired of working with, or for, scumbags. I know, ‘cause I was tired too. When SHIELD found me, I had the same look in my eyes that I saw in yours.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Clint shrugged. “You shouldn’t, I guess. But you were ready to let me shoot you, so how could this be worse?”

“If you don’t know, then you are very, very lucky. Besides, you don’t have the authority to offer me this, do you?” Natalia was watching him through narrowed eyes.

“No, I don’t. But my boss does, and you can trust him.” The look he got was skeptical. “No, seriously. He’s the most honorable man I’ve ever me in my entire life. If he says you can come in, then you can.”

Romanova tilted her chin at him. “Call him.”

Clint clicked his tongue to activate his comms and had the satisfaction of seeing one of her eyebrows arch in surprise.

“Coulson, you there?”

“Agent Barton.” Phil’s voice was flat. Clint was probably in a whole lot of trouble.

“Coulson she wants to come in.”

“You’re being played, Barton.”

“I don’t think so, boss. She’s tired. She wants to talk to you. Phil, I believe her.” There were a few seconds of silence. Clint didn’t say anything else. Phil was either going to trust his judgement or not.

“Where are you?”

Clint sagged with relief, and gave Phil directions to the building.

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Phil looked up at the sound of Clint’s distinctive knock on his office door, but it didn’t open. He waited a beat, then called, “Come in.”

Clint didn’t head over to the sofa to flop into his usual sprawl, instead he stood in front of Phil’s desk, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Do you need something?” Phil asked.

“Uh, no. No, I just…” Clint cleared his throat. “Um, are we okay? It’s just that I don’t have very many friends, and you’re, uh, the best one I’ve ever had, so I want to know if I screwed that up, so that maybe I can try to fix it?” Clint’s worry showed on his face, and Phil couldn’t help but forgive him, and smile a fond, reassuring smile at him. “We’re fine, Clint. You made a call. The right call, as it turned out. Natasha Romanoff is almost certainly going to be an outstanding SHIELD agent.”

“Fury okayed it?”

“He took a little convincing, but eventually he saw the light.”

“That’s… that’s awesome Phil, thank you.” Clint’s shoulders finally relaxed.

“I didn’t just do it for you. I did it for her, and for SHIELD. I hope I don’t end up regretting it.”

“You won’t. At least I’m pretty sure you won’t. I’m not saying I think she’s gonna fit right in with the other agents, but it was the right thing to do.”

“Yes, it was. Look, I’m just about done here, do you want to go grab something to eat?”

Clint’s face fell. “I’d love to, Phil, I really would, but I’ve, uh, got a date. There’s this guy I’ve been seeing, and it’s maybe going somewhere, and I haven’t seen him in a couple of weeks because of the op, and–”
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Phil waved a hand, “It’s fine, I understand. Go. Have a nice night.” Phil was pretty sure that he managed to keep a friendly smile on his face until the door closed behind Clint.

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Phil had had missions go sideways before, but this was one for the books. It had started out simply enough; an investigation, like Mexico, like any number of other missions he’d done with Clint since. This one was a suspected AIM base in a remote part of northern Wisconsin —though remote was redundant when you were talking about northern Wisconsin—but it was the usual protocol. Sneak in, take a look around, find out if it was something that SHIELD needed to worry about. Clint’s eyes plus Phil’s experience made them a great team for this kind of mission, and they usually went without a hitch. Usually.

It was just bad luck that the lab had turned out to be doing some sort of animal experiments, and that the rhesus monkeys had started shrieking the minute Phil stepped foot in the room. Which set off an alarm. Which brought a dozen AIM agents running. Clint and Phil had fought their way out without too much trouble, and made it to the vehicle they’d stashed. They were almost two miles down the road when the back end of their SUV jumped into the air and flipped the vehicle end-over-end.

Still, it wasn’t that bad. They were wearing seat belts, and the airbags did their jobs, and they crawled out of the wreckage with only minor scrapes and bruises. Or so Phil thought, because when he went to stand up, the world swam alarmingly, and he had to grab hold of the upside-down door frame to keep himself from collapsing.

“Phil, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Clint’s voice sounded far away, and Phil shook his head. That wasn’t right, Clint wouldn’t have gone far… He put his hand to his side where an itch was starting to turn into an ache and his fingers encountered warm, sticky blood. He looked down at the twisted metal he’d climbed over to get out of the car and saw the jagged piece that had done the damage. He looked back up into Clint’s worried eyes.

“I need to sit down.” Phil said, and did so, carefully, with his back to the broken car window.

“Don’t move. I’m getting the first-aid kit.”

Clint dropped to his knees and opened the kit, then reached for the buckles on Phil’s tac suit. Phil’s adrenaline spiked and he just managed to stop himself from hitting Clint. As it was he said “No,” sharply and shoved Clint’s hands away.

“I’m just trying to see how bad you’re hurt. You need to let me help.”

“Don’t touch me.”

“Christ, Phil, I know you’ve got that PTSD thing and all, but I didn’t figure it would be an issue when you’re bleeding.”

“It’s always an issue, Barton.” Phil’s voice came out weaker and more tired-sounding than he liked.
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“Shit. Sorry. Tell me what to do.”

“Just sit there and don’t move and hold the flashlight so I can see what I’m doing.” Clint sat back on his heels and chewed his lower lip, but did as he was told. Phil hissed as he pulled the fabric of his tac suit away from the wound. It was low on his left side, just above his belt, and he hissed again as he tried to twist to get a good look, then pressed his lips together tightly for a minute.

“How does it look?” he finally asked Clint.

Clint scrunched down so that he could see better, and Phil tensed, but Clint’s hands didn’t move.

“I think it’s just a bad gash. I can’t see very well, because it’s bleeding pretty bad, but it’s not spurting and I can’t see your intestines or anything, so I think it’s just skin and muscle damage.”

Phil nodded, relieved. “Good. Open up one of those large self-stick dressing and give it to me.”

Clint had to put the flashlight down to do it, but there was just enough light for Phil to see Clint handing him the dressing. He twisted and grunted and tried to get it in position by feel. He was mostly successful, he hoped. “What does that look like?” he asked Clint.

“Uh, you should probably put another one on top, a little lower if you can manage it, and maybe use the ace bandage around it to put some pressure on it?” Phil nodded again, concerned about how the world swam a little each time he did. He accepted another bandage from Clint.

“The docs must love you,” Clint said drily.

“I’m okay with SHIELD medical personnel touching me,” Phil said, consciously trying to keep himself focused.

“Oh.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you Clint.” Phil breathed heavily as he twisted to stick the second dressing on.

“I know, it’s okay, really. It’s fine.”

By the time he’d gotten the first-aid kit’s two ace bandages wrapped around his middle Phil was sweating and swearing. Clint, to his credit just sat there, holding the light and chewing his lip.

“Call for extraction. Then do a bit of a scout around. See if you can tell what blew us off the road - though I’m pretty sure it was a land mine of some sort.” Phil drew his sidearm from its holster and checked the clip, then gave Clint a pointed look.

Clint nodded. “Okay. Let me just do this first, yeah?” He unfolded the foil emergency blanket from the kit and gestured, not moving to drape it over Phil until he nodded. Then he stood up, and hesitated.

“I’m fine, Clint,” Phil said, keeping his voice as strong and steady as he could to reassure. “Go.”

Clint nodded, and moved around to the other side of the SUV. Phil heard him calling for extraction, then moving out in a standard search pattern. Phil took a couple of deep breaths in and out. He’d actually reacted well, all things considered, to Clint touching him when he was injured. He could have dealt with it without panicking, if he’d needed to. If he was hurt worse, and couldn’t bandage himself, he would have been… not okay, but he would have been able to cope with Clint’s hands on his skin. That was good. It meant he was still making progress. Or maybe it just meant that he trusted Clint more than anyone in his life, except for maybe Nick and Jasper...

He counted his breaths, in and out, slow and calm. He was at twenty-seven when he heard a noise and raised the gun in his hand.

“It’s me, Phil,” Clint said softly, and squatted down next to him again.

“Sit-rep.”

“No one out there that I can see. Some kind of land mine in the road. We didn’t set it off on our way up, so I’m guessing it was radio controlled and someone at that AIM base armed it when the alarms went off. Pretty slick, actually. Extraction in 20 minutes. You going to be okay until then?”

“Sure,” Phil said, but it came out ’s-s-shur’ because his teeth were chattering.

“Phil!” Clint said sharply. “Stay with me, stay awake.”

“M’awake,” Phil said. “Jus’ cold.”

Clint searched through the first aid kit for a moment muttering “Shit, fuck” under his breath. “Sorry, boss, there’s nothing else in here, no hand-warmers, no second blanket. There’s nothing… I can’t do anything to help.”

Phil closed his eyes for a second, and took a deep breath. He could do this. “Sit here, next to me,” Phil pointed with his chin to indicate his uninjured side. Clint only hesitated for a second, then did, leaving an inch of space between their shoulders.

“Put your arm around me.”

“Phil?”

“Do it, Clint.”

“Are you sure? I mean I don’t wanna–“

“Clint, I need you to trust me that I know what I can cope with. Just don’t put your hand anywhere except on my arm or shoulder, and it’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” Clint scooted carefully over until their thighs were touching, and slowly put his arm around Phil’s shoulder, laying his hand lightly on Phil’s bicep. “Is that okay?”

“It’s good.” Phil said, and he wasn’t lying. It felt good to have Clint’s arm around him. Aside from medical exams and sparring with Jasper, he hadn’t been touched in far too long. He leaned into Clint’s side, Clint’s warmth.

“I’m just gonna…” Clint adjusted the emergency blanket so that it was covering as much of Phil as possible. “There. So, could you, uh, maybe tell me what not to do, so I don’t fuck up again?”

“You didn’t fuck up, Clint.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Now’s not the time.” If he was going to explain any of this to Clint it needed to be when he wasn’t injured and waiting for rescue. It needed to be when he felt safe, and in control. His eyes slipped shut and he jerked them back open.

“What’s wrong?”

“Tired.”

“Did you hit your head or something? Dammit, Phil, stay awake. Talk to me.”

“Don’t want you to think that I’m a liability in the field. Psych cleared me. I’m fit for duty.” Phil tried not to mumble.

“Sure, of course you are, boss. You’re a badass. Boss? Phil, stay awake. Don’t you fucking die on me, Phil. Don’t you fucking dare.” Phil caught the edge of fear in Clint’s voice, and that did more to rouse him than anything.

“M’not gonna die. Too tough. Talk to me. Tell me a story about the circus or something.”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll tell you a secret I’ve never told anyone. But you have to stay awake. Okay Phil? Promise me you’ll stay awake.”

Phil wanted to say that Clint didn’t need to share his secrets, but the earnestness in his voice wouldn’t let him turn the offer down. “Awake. Promise.”

"So," Clint said, conversationally, "have you ever wondered why I always enter all the office pools?"

Clint's enthusiastic participation in the office pools at SHIELD was the stuff of legend. Whether it was football, baseball, hockey, or the intercollegiate women's lacrosse finals, if there was a betting pool for it, Clint was in. If there was a pool to guess when Tina the Archivist's baby was due, or what Stuart from Accounting was going to score when he had to

re-certify his small arms training, Clint was in. It had gotten so that people from all over SHIELD knew to come seek Clint out when they were running any kind of pool.

Once, and only once, someone had made up a ridiculously fake pool just to see if they could get Clint to enter it. Clint had cheerfully handed over ten bucks, but the unfortunate perpetrator had discovered his desk chair mysteriously sabotaged, and a note pinned to his desk with an arrow, reading 'It's not nice to take advantage of people.' Clint got his ten bucks back and no one ever tried it again.

"So, when I was first at SHIELD, I didn't know what kind of deal it was, and whether I could trust any of you or what. I figured I might need to disappear again someday, if I screwed up or something. So I set up a few caches. You know; money, clothes, papers, weapons. Just a couple in New York at first, then around the States wherever we worked, and even a few international ones if we were in a major city for any length of time.

“But I realized pretty quick that SHIELD is damn good at finding people. And I'm smart enough to know that if they really wanted to find me, they could look at all my bank transactions, ATM withdrawals, and so on, and since the banks record the serial numbers of the bills they stock the machines with these days, I knew that SHIELD could, if they were trying to find me, track me down if I started spending money that they could trace to a withdrawal that I'd made.

“So every couple of months, I take some cash out of the ATM in the lobby at Headquarters, and I launder it. Through the pools. I don't mind if I lose nine out of ten pools I enter, ten bucks here, twenty bucks there. Eventually I win one, and get a stack of bills that can be traced to half the employees in accounting; or records, or the recruits, or whatever, depending on what the pool was.

“And I hold onto all those bills, put them in an envelope in my go-bag. And every time we’re somewhere that I figure might be useful, someday, and I can disappear for a bit without anyone asking any questions, and without jeopardizing the mission, of course, I go set up a new cache. I've got them in Istanbul and Jakarta and Sarajevo and London and Paris and Athens and all sorts of places.

So if things ever go bad, if I ever need to run, I've got it covered, you know?”

“Why are you telling me this, Clint?” asked Phil, and Clint thought with satisfaction that Phil's words were a little clearer. "If you ever go rogue, who do you think they're going to send after you?"

“Because I trust you. I know that if I ever had to run, you'd trust that I had a good reason. And I don't want SHIELD to be able to find me, but…” Clint paused. This was revealing even more of himself than he'd originally intended, but... he wanted to. He wanted Phil to know just how deep their friendship went. “I don't want SHIELD to be able to find me, but if something happens and I need to run, and you ever need to find me, I want you to be able to. That's why I'm telling you. I trust you Phil."

"182 East 5th Street in Mount Vernon," Phil said, pronouncing his words carefully the way a drunk who's trying to fool a cop does.

"What?"

"182 East 5th Street in Mount Vernon," Phil said again. "Repeat it back to me."

"182 East 5th Street in Mount Vernon," Clint said obediently.

"My safe-house in New York. In case. If something happens, that's the first place you look. Tell you the rest later. But remember that one. Good place. Use it if you need to." Phil's voice was urgent, and Clint could tell that he wasn't going to be conscious very much longer. He tried to pull Phil closer to him, tried to give him more warmth, more strength.

"182 East 5th Street in Mount Vernon," Clint said again. "I won't forget, Phil."

Phil nodded, then his head popped up. A moment later, Clint heard it too: the distinctive whine of Quinjet engines.

“Woohoo! The cavalry is here!” Clint started to move away, but Phil grabbed his arm in a vice grip.

“Stay.”

“Of course, Phil, if you want.”

“Help me onto the jet, and stay with me until we get back to Headquarters.”

“Yeah,” Clint said softly, giving Phil’s arm a squeeze. He realized suddenly, how scared and vulnerable Phil must be feeling. He’d said that he was okay being touched by the SHIELD doctors, but did that extend to the medics and the extraction team? Clint didn’t know. “Don’t worry, Phil. I’m not going anywhere, I’ll be right here, for as long as you need me. Promise.” Clint watched the Quinjet touch down on the road in front of them. “Do you want to try to walk, or wait for them to bring a stretcher?”

“I can walk. Help me up.”

Clint did, being careful to let Phil hold onto him, rather than the other way around. They shuffled slowly towards the jet, and climbed in. Clint hovered uncertainly nearby as the medic took over, checking the makeshift dressing on Phil’s wound, but leaving it in place, and wrapping a blood pressure cuff around his arm.

“It would be better if you lie down, sir,” the medic said, and Clint saw Phil shake his head slowly.

“I’ve been injured before. I know it’s not that bad. I’ll lie down when I get to SHIELD Medical.”

“Okay, sir.” The medic was young and obviously a little bit intimidated by Agent Coulson, and also maybe by the way Clint was watching his every move.

“Sit, Clint,” Phil said, and Clint did, sitting down next to him on the bench, close, but not touching. “Thank you,” Phil said softly, so that Clint barely heard him over the whine of the

engines.

“I’ll always have your back, Phil. You know that.” Clint said, not knowing how else to put what he felt into words. It seemed to be the right thing to say, though, because Phil nodded.

“Yes, I do.” Then he shuffled sideways a little, so that he was leaning against Clint’s shoulder, and closed his eyes.

Clint sat there, motionless, listening to him breathe for the entire trip back to base.

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“Let him in,” Clint heard Phil call from across the room, and he smiled beseechingly at the nurse who’d been arguing with him.

The nurse sighed and rolled his eyes and waved Clint through.

“Hey, boss, how are you feeling?”

“Like someone just stitched up a jagged hole in my side,” Phil said, and then winced.

“The lidocaine wearing off? You want me to ask them to give you something else?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s just a few stitches.” Clint knew Phil was in pain, but if he didn’t want meds for it, that was his choice, obviously. Now that he was reassured that Phil was okay, he didn’t know what to do, or say.

“Uh, is there anything I can get you? Like food or clothes or anything?” Phil was wearing a grey SHIELD t-shirt that looked a little too small for him. The fabric was tight across his chest and Clint had to stop himself from staring. He’d always known, intellectually, that Phil must have a serious set of muscles under his suit, but he’d never seen the evidence first hand until now. Phil’s biceps swelled under the thin material of the t-shirt, and–

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Phil said, dragging Clint’s thoughts away from his handler’s body. “In my office, in my left-hand desk drawer, the middle one, there’s a wooden box. Go get it for me, will you? And no peeking!”

“‘Course not. Back in a couple of minutes.” Clint hurried, curious about the box, of course, but more glad to have something he could do for Phil. He knew the wound wasn’t serious. He knew, again, intellectually, that Phil was going to be fine. But that did nothing to stop the nagging sense of wrongness at the back of his brain. Phil was hurt.

Clint found the box where Phil said it would be, and resisted the temptation to peek. He tucked it under his arm and jogged back to the Medical wing.

“Pull up a chair,” Phil said when he poked his head back into the small room. Clint dragged the crappy plastic guest chair closer to Phil’s bed and sat down. Then he held out the box. But Phil didn’t take it.

“No, it’s for you. Open it. Happy birthday. ”
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Clint stared at him, then thought for a second. The op started on Thursday, and today was Saturday, so that meant… right.

“Phil, you didn’t have to…” Clint was staring down at the box in his hands now, and noticing how well-made and elegant it was.

“I know I didn’t. I wanted to. It’s not… just go ahead and open it.”

Clint did, not knowing what he was expecting to find. A wide smile spread across his face when what he found was a matched pair of throwing knives with utilitarian blades but beautifully carved wooden hilts. He picked one out of the box and weighed it in his hand.

“Phil, these are beautiful, thank you.” Clint looked up into Phil’s smiling eyes, and had to glance down again before too much of what he was feeling showed. He tossed the knife and caught it by the hilt. “Perfect balance, great texture. These are awesome. Where did you find them?”

“I know a guy in the city. His card is in the box, so if you like, you can get more made.”

Clint was still tossing the knife in the air and catching it rhythmically. “I’ll get a scabbard made for it that will go on my tac suit. The development guys will do it for me if I ask nicely and buy them donuts. I… thank you, Phil.” he said, looking up and meeting Phil’s eyes again.

“You’re welcome.” Phil’s tone said everything his words didn’t. ‘I know you haven’t had a lot of good birthdays,’ and ‘That’s what friends are for,’ and ‘I care about you.’

“I’m gonna set up a target in the archery lane at the range so I can practice with these. I, uh… I guess I should let you get some rest?”

Phil shrugged. “I’ve got nothing to do until dinner,” he said.

“In that case, I’m gonna go put these in my locker, then I’m gonna grab us some burgers from the diner down the road - because I know what the dinners are like here in the Med wing and you do not want to be eating the chicken-pot-pie, believe me. And I’ll bring you your laptop and I’ll grab my flight training manuals, and keep you company for a bit. How does that sound?” Clint asked with an uncertain smile.

“Perfect. That sounds just perfect.”

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Phil watched with a swell of pride as Clint stood at attention in his dress uniform with three other SHIELD agents and saluted smartly as his flight instructor pinned his pilot’s wings to his dress uniform, right above his parachute jump insignia. Phil could see the pride in Clint’s face, too, in the shining, genuine smile as he shook hands with Maria Hill, who was standing in for Fury, and accepted her congratulations.

Once the ceremony was over, Phil hung back, waiting until everyone else had shaken hands with Clint and patted him on the back. Clint spotted him and headed over.
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“I know I’ve said it before, Phil, but thank you. I couldn’t have done any of this without you,” Clint said warmly.

“All I did was make sure you got the opportunities you deserve. You did all the work.”

“Still, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Phil said, and saw Clint’s right hand move as if he wanted to reach out. “Congratulations,” Phil said, sticking out his hand to shake. Clint smiled widely and took it in both of his, squeezing for a minute before letting go.

“So, where do you want to go out to celebrate? That pizza place on Washington Ave., or somewhere a little fancier for the occasion?”

Clint’s face fell, and Phil’s guts tightened.

“I’m sorry, Phil. I… I have plans. Um, with Jake. I, uh, haven’t seen much of him lately because of my training schedule, so…” Clint trailed off, looking miserable.

“It’s fine, Clint. I understand completely. Go have a good time.” The words tasted bitter to Phil but he managed to get them out smoothly.

“Thanks, boss. Catch you tomorrow? We can do lunch or something.”

“That sounds good. See you then.” Phil congratulated himself on keeping his voice even and his face neutral.

Clint gave him a smile and a wave and headed for the lockers to change. Phil took one last long look at the retreating figure, spring in his step, head held high. ‘Stop wanting what you can’t have,’ Phil told himself sternly. ‘He’s a good friend, and that has to be enough.’

Phil stayed at work until he couldn’t find anything else to do, then headed home. He stripped off his jacket and tie, but didn’t bother changing out of his suit pants. They needed dry-cleaning anyway. He ate a frozen dinner in front of the TV and resolutely didn’t touch the bottle of scotch Clint had given him. It was past nine o’clock and he was settling in for a Supernanny marathon when the door buzzer went.

“Phil, it’s Clint. Can I come up?”

Phil sprang to his feet and buzzed him in. Then waited by the door. He didn’t need to wait long before he heard footsteps in the hall and put his eye to the peephole to confirm it was Clint before opening the door.

Clint stood there looking a little sheepish with a six-pack of beer dangling from one hand.

“I thought you had a date?” Phil said before he could stop himself.

“I did.” Clint said, leaning against the door frame with a sigh. “He broke up with me.”

“Shit, Clint, I’m sorry.” Phil’s words were genuine. Much as he had to fight down a stab of jealousy every time Clint mentioned his dates, Phil did honestly want his friend to be happy. And right now he obviously wasn’t.

“Uh, I know it’s late, so I can go find Nat if you’re not…” Clint finished the sentence by gesturing with the six pack.

“Come in. You know you’re always welcome here, Clint, any time.”

“Thanks. I just… aw fuck, I don’t know.” Clint threw himself down on the sofa and wrestled one of the cans out of the plastic wrap.

“I’m just going to get a glass, do you want one?”

“Yeah, that’d be good, thanks.”

Phil came back with two glasses, and also a bag of pretzels and a bowl.

He handed Clint one of the glasses, popped the tab on his own beer and poured it into his glass, then tore open the bag of pretzels and dumped them into the bowl.

Clint grinned at him. “You’re the best, Phil. Really. Nat would have dug out half-a-bottle of vodka and told me I’m an idiot for hoping that things would be different this time.”

“You’re not an idiot. And there’s nothing wrong with hoping things will work out. What happened?”

“The usual. I’m not around enough. I cancel on things too often. My schedule’s too difficult to live with. Which is true, fuck, but what can I say? I can’t tell him I’m actually an assassin and a super-spy and I’ve been busy lately because I’ve been learning how to fly top-secret experimental jets.” Clint slumped further and drank some of his beer. “Thanks for the glass. Drinking beer out of a can reminds me of my father getting drunk on our living room sofa and throwing the empty cans at my mother.”

Phil didn’t know what to say to that, so he didn’t say anything. Besides, he was pretty sure Clint just needed him to listen.

“Next week would have been six months. That’s the longest I’ve been in a relationship since… since always. I’d printed up the disclosure forms. I was gonna start the process of having him vetted so that I could tell him who I really was.”

“I didn’t realize it was that serious.”

“I dunno if it was. I mean, he wasn’t the love of my life or anything, but we were pretty good together. At least I thought we were, but it seemed like he was just hanging out with me until something better came along, and with my schedule it wasn’t worth his effort any more.”

“Did he actually say that?”

“Near enough. He said that if there was more of a connection then he’d be willing to make the effort, but that good sex wasn’t enough to base a relationship on. Fuck, I mean I know I’m just a half-educated hick with good aim, but I thought… I really liked him.”

“You’re a lot more than that, Clint. You’re intelligent and hardworking. You’re honest and thoughtful and caring. You see the good in people and you never, ever give up working for something you care about, or something you believe in. If he couldn’t see any of that in you, then he doesn’t deserve to be with you.” Phil took a sip of his beer. He shouldn’t have said that.

“If you think I’m so great then why won’t you go out with me?” Clint’s face fell. “Shit, I’m sorry. Forget I said that. I should go.” Clint put his half-finished beer down on the table and started to get up.

“Clint, stay. Please.” Phil could hear his own voice cracking as he spoke, and cleared his throat. Clint sat back down and looked at him. Phil took a deep breath and said the words. “I’m impotent. That’s why I can’t have a relationship with you. I can’t have a relationship with anyone.”

“Jesus, Phil, I’m sorry,” Clint said softly. “I guess that’s, uh, related to your PTSD thing?”

“Yes. It… Years ago, when I was a SHIELD field agent, I was captured on a mission.” Phil wrapped both hands around his beer glass to stop them shaking. He could do this.

“You don’t have to tell me. You don’t need to explain. I… shit, Phil. I just don’t know what to say.”

Clint wasn’t withdrawing, at least. Wasn’t backing away, or glancing towards the door. Phil wanted… no, he needed Clint’s support, his friendship. Friends were all he had, now. He sucked in a breath.

“I want to tell you, if you’ll listen. You don’t have to, but if you… I’d like you to know.” Phil was giving Clint an out, and he would respect Clint’s choice not to deal with anyone’s emotional baggage except his own.

“Christ, Phil, of course I’ll listen, if you want to tell me. You’re my best friend. Of course I’ll listen.” Clint sat with his hands tucked between his knees, and Phil wondered if he was doing it consciously, to reassure Phil that he wouldn’t try to touch.

Phil let out the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, then shrugged when he saw that Clint had noticed.

“Sorry, it’s just… I’ve never actually told anyone before, not like this. The only other people who know are Fury and Jasper. They were on the team that rescued me. And of course some of the SHIELD doctors and the counselors in the Psych department.” Phil sighed, then took a long, slow sip of his beer, trying to sooth the sudden sand-like dryness in his throat. When he put his glass down, suddenly wanting his hands free, he saw that Clint had shifted on the sofa and was sitting back in the corner with one foot tucked under his other thigh. Now Clint’s

hands were loose and relaxed on his knees, and he was watching Phil with serious expression.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Clint said.

“I know you’ll always have my back,” Phil said. “Just like I’ll always have yours. So,” he picked up the thread of his story, “I was a field agent. This was eight years ago. We were on a mission in Honduras, and I was captured. Not by Hydra or AIM, but by a drug cartel that thought we were Federales come to arrest them. It took thirteen days for SHIELD to find out where I was being held and rescue me. During that time I was…” at this point Phil dropped his eyes, and looked at his hands which were clenched in his lap. He took a deep breath. And another.

Clint didn’t say anything. He just sat there, quietly. Waiting.

“I was tortured and-” another deep breath, forcing the word out with his exhale, “raped. Repeatedly.” He couldn’t bring himself to look up at Clint’s face. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t see disgust, but even shock or horror would be hard to take. “Since then I… I can’t…” Phil stopped and the silence lengthened. His heart was pounding and he tried to just breath in and out, slowly.

“I want to reach out to you right now, Phil. But I don’t know what the best way to do that is,” Clint said softly from his end of the sofa.

“Just… just stay. Just stay right there for a bit, okay?”

“As long as you need, Phil. Whatever you need for as long as you need it. Always.”

“I’ll be okay in a minute,” Phil said as he dragged in another lungful of air, trying to calm his racing heart.

“I know you will,” Clint said softly. Then, after a few seconds’ silence, “I’m honored that you told me. That sounds hokey, but it’s true.”

“You’re my friend.” Phil was able to look up to say that, and Clint was sitting, his body calm and loose, in the corner of the sofa. It was exactly what Phil needed to see, and his next breath was easier.

“And I’m very, very glad I am,” Clint said with a small smile. “If there’s ever anything I can do… I mean I don’t know anything about, well, anything to do with it, obviously. But if you ever need to talk, or not talk, or y’know, just have someone around or whatever, you know you can always call me, right? I mean that. Any time. For any reason.”

“Thank you, Clint.” There was another long pause, but Phil felt calmer now that Clint had accepted it so easily. “Is there anything in particular you want to ask me? I won’t promise to answer, but if there’s something you want to know…”

“Uh, just, I guess you’ve had therapy, yeah? And it didn’t help much?”

“I had four years of therapy, and it helped a great deal,” Phil said. He picked up his beer and had another sip while he decided how much to tell Clint. “It got me functioning like a human being again, most of the time, under most circumstances. It got me re-certified for field work. It got me to the point where I can sleep in my own bed with the lights off and without a loaded gun under my pillow. I see the SHIELD senior psychiatrist every six months for a review. If she ever thinks I need to go back into regular therapy in order to be able to perform my duties, then I will.” Phil knew that he sounded defensive, but he couldn’t help it.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean… I just… sorry.” Clint looked down, miserably.

“It’s okay, Clint. I shouldn’t have gotten defensive like that. It’s just… sometimes I get the impression that people think that I haven’t recovered completely, whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean, because I didn’t try hard enough, or something.”

“No,” Clint’s body twitched, but Phil saw him pull himself back into the corner of the sofa. “I don’t think that. Not at all. I guess… I guess I just kinda feel bad for you that…”

“That I can’t have sex.”

“Well, yeah, that too. But more that you can’t relax around people. Ever.”

“There are some people I can relax around. Fury, Jasper. And you. I do trust you, Clint. Don’t ever doubt that.” It was deeply important to Phil that Clint know that, and believe it.

“I know. You’re probably the first person in my life who ever did.” Clint’s tone was wistful.

“You’ll find someone, Clint. You’ll find someone who appreciates you for who you are.”

“Well, until then I’m gonna hang out with you, okay?” Clint grinned, and reached for his beer and a handful of pretzels.

Phil smiled for the first time in ten minutes. “More than okay.”

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Clint was lounging on Phil’s office sofa, looking at a set of 8x10 glossies of their next target.

“You’ve been training with Agent Romanoff quite a bit lately,” Phil said conversationally, his eyes not moving from his computer screen.

“Yeah, I guess. She doesn’t know too many people around here yet, and she gets bored sometimes. I remember what that’s like, so I spend time with her. Mostly what she wants to do is train, so that’s what we do.”

“That’s all?”

“We’re not sleeping together, if that’s what you’re asking.” Clint was pretty sure Phil wasn’t, but he wanted to clear the air on that right away. The SHIELD rumor mill already had him in the Black Widow’s bed, or her in his, and while Clint didn’t care much what junior agents whispered about, but he wanted Phil to know the truth.
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“I wasn’t. What I meant was, are you just training, or are you spending time together socially. Are you friends, do you get along?” Phil asked.

“Nat doesn’t really do social. Or friends. Yet, anyway. I’d probably be able to answer better if I knew why you were asking.” Phil didn’t usually beat around the bush, and so Clint was wondering what was going on.

Phil stopped typing, and turned to him, looking at him for a long moment before picking up a slim file-folder from his desk and extending it towards him. Clint peeled himself off the sofa, and took it. The label on the tab read “Strike Team Delta.”

“When we get back from this op, if you agree, this is your new assignment.”

Clint flipped open the folder and quickly scanned the sheets inside. A one-page summary of his service record. Agent Natasha Romanoff, same, although the service record part of her sheet was a single short paragraph. And a page confirming the formation of a SHIELD strike team, code name 'Delta'. He looked back up at Phil.

“You’ll still be my… our handler, right?” It said so on the form, but Clint had to check.

“Yes. The way we get missions and prep for them wouldn’t change. But we’d be working as a team more often, just the three of us, and only occasionally with other agents, or a larger team.”

“What’s the ‘if I agree’ bit about. You mean I get a choice?” Clint was used to Phil telling him what to do, with work-related things, anyway. Choosing an assignment wasn’t something he’d done before.

“You’re a Level 4 agent. You have the right to decline a major change in assignment.”

“But you just said not much would change.” Clint looked at the papers in his hand, scanning them again quickly to make sure he hadn’t missed anything.

“Except that you’ll be working closely with Agent Romanoff on missions. If you’re not comfortable with that, you could decline.”

“Oh, you mean like if I didn’t trust her to have my back,” Clint suddenly understood what Phil was actually asking him. Did he trust Nat? Did he trust her with his life? With both of their lives?

Clint sat back down on the sofa and read through the papers again, carefully this time, even though he already knew what they said. Partly he was giving himself time to think, and time to decide what he was going to say to Phil, and partly he was checking for any loopholes in the assignment, even though he trusted Phil to be straight with him about what it meant. Once he’d read everything again, he closed the folder and put it down.

“Nat hasn’t told me much about her past, beyond what was in her debrief. What she has told me is kinda scary. She’s… she’s not quite right in the head, and she knows it. But then again, none of us are, or we probably wouldn’t be working here in the first place. She’ll do what she

says. She won't break a promise. If she signs on and says 'yes' to this, she'll give it 100%. And I'd rather have her at my back than… well, than anyone else I've ever worked with at SHIELD, except you."

Phil nodded slowly. As if it was the answer he'd been hoping for, but not entirely sure of.

"Can I give you one piece of advice, though?"

"Of course."

"I dunno what clearance level they've given her, and I don't know how you were going to bring it up, but don't give her a choice. Don't ask her if she wants this assignment, tell her she's been given it. It… She doesn't have a lot of practice at making her own decisions about this kind of stuff. She's not very good at it yet."

"I'll take that under advisement," Phil said in a tone that Clint knew meant 'Thanks for telling me.' "Now, about this target in Laos…"

Chapter 5: The Fifth Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The Fifth Year

"You've got three incoming Nat. Fifteen meters at your eight o'clock, twenty-five meters at your four o'clock, and one directly in front of you, twelve meters and closing fast. Do you want me to-"

"Negative. I've got them. Cover the corridor. Kill anything that comes down it."

"Will do."

Clint ran lightly along the ceiling beams until he had a better view of the corridor Nat meant, the one that led to the cells where they presumed Agents Ellis and Kim were being held.

He kept his eyes on Nat and the three assailants she was facing, not that he didn't think she could handle them, he knew she could, but he had her back, just in case. No one else came down the corridor. Nat dispatched the three bad guys swiftly and silently, and then headed toward the cells in search of their agents.

"Barton, I've found our guys," she said over the comms.

"Good. So spring 'em and we're outta here."

"There are a number of other prisoners in these cells." Nat's voice had gone flat, and Clint was beginning to learn what that meant.

"Can we get them all out safely?"

"We don't know if they're friendly or hostile."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend? Let me check with Coulson." Clint clicked his tongue to switch channels on his comm link. *"Coulson, we've located Agents Ellis and Kim, but there's a bunch of other prisoners being held in the cell block. We want to spring the rest too."*

"Will it compromise the mission?"

"Probably not? I mean, I can't give you any guarantees, obviously, but Nat and I should be able to handle it."

"Okay, go ahead. Release the other prisoners at your discretion."

"Thanks boss. We'll be out in five." Clint clicked his comms back to the channel he and Nat were using.

"Coulson says 'yes' on springing the rest of the prisoners. You okay to get all the doors open, or you want me to come down and help?"

"I'm fine. Stay there and keep watch."

"Will do." Clint's eyes darted everywhere, watching. *"And we've got more incoming. Four. No six, at least."*

"Keep them busy."

"No problem." Clint had the element of surprise. The bad guys were moving cautiously across the floor, guns raised, looking around. As usual, no one looked up. Clint took a second to consider his options, then grabbed four arrows out of his quiver and silently moved into position. Just as the bad guys were halfway between the door and Nat's location with the prisoners, Clint swung down from the beam he'd been perched on. Hanging upside down by his knees, he shot four of the six bad guys in quick succession, his fourth arrow finding its target before the first guy had finished collapsing to the ground.

"Where the fuck are those coming from?" One of the two remaining bad guys asked. He was crouched down as low as he could get, using his colleague's body as a partial shield. The bad guys, for a change, were well-trained enough that they didn't start shooting without being able to see their target.

Moving silently, Clint drew two more arrows from his quiver, glad that he'd insisted that SHIELD R&D design one that worked upside down. He nocked the first arrow and somersaulted off the beam, shooting in mid-air at the fifth bad guy, and landing behind the sixth and last. He pressed the sharp tip of the arrow in his hand to the sixth man's throat.

"Are there any more coming?" he asked, pressing the arrow tip deep.

"Six more, through the back," the guy croaked.

"Shit. Nat did you hear that? You've got more bogies on your six."

"I see them. Come help me get these people out of here."

Clint stuck the arrow back in his quiver and kicked the guy in the head, knocking him out. Then he ran over to where Nat had marshaled the prisoners in the corridor.

"Okay folks, as quickly and quietly as you can," Clint said. "Agents Ellis and Kim, take the lead and head for that door, but wait inside. There might be more hostiles outside. Ready? Go."

The prisoners moved off and Nat and Clint took up positions on either side of the corridor, Clint with his bow and Nat with a pair of pistols.

"So, this is fun. Are the missions usually like this?" Nat asked conversationally as they started to pick off the bad guys who were shooting at them from the other end of the corridor.

“Nah, usually they tend to involve a lot more waiting around for the opposition to show up. These guys have been positively forthcoming.” They both ducked out of the way of a spray of automatic fire, then Nat poked one gun and one eye back around the wall and shot the guy with the sub-machine gun.

“Nice shot,” Clint said as he shot a guy reaching for the dropped automatic rifle through the wrist, pinning his arm to the floor.

“You too.” Nat flashed him a quick smile. “This is getting boring. What do you say we rush them, get it over with.”

“Sure, you want to go, I’ll cover you?”

Nat just gave a sharp decisive nod, and mouthed ‘three, two, one’ at him, then dove down the corridor. Clint grinned in appreciation, then followed. When they got to the other end, they found that the bad guys had fled.

“Right, well that’s that, then. Let’s go get our agents, and the rest of the prisoners, out of here.” As they headed back to the door, Clint clicked his comms again. *“We’re on our way out with Ellis and Kim and the other prisoners. Any action out there?”*

“No, you’re clear. Does anyone need medical attention?” Coulson’s voice was calm and steady, as always.

“Well, everyone’s upright and walking, and no one’s bleeding. Apart from that we didn’t really have time to do an assessment,” Clint said as Nat eased the door open slowly, checking for hostiles.

“Understood. I’ll meet you at the extraction point.”

“Roger,” he said to Coulson, and then “Okay, let’s move out. Nat, d’you wanna take the lead?”

Nat led the rag-tag group out of the warehouse and through a couple of back alleys until they reached the back of a delicatessen where a large white truck was parked. Nat raised her gun when the driver’s door swung open, only to lower it again as Coulson climbed out.

“The car we had wasn’t big enough for all the strays you picked up, so I borrowed something with more room. It won’t be a comfortable ride, but at least it will be a short one,” Coulson said.

“Borrowed, huh boss?” Clint said, highly amused at the image of Phil Coulson hot-wiring a truck.

“SHIELD will return it. Right now, we need to get these people out of here.”

“Sure thing.” Clint opened the back of the truck and started helping the rescued prisoners to climb in. Once they were all loaded, he headed for the cab. Phil was already behind the wheel, and Nat was standing by the passenger door, keeping watch.

“All right, let’s blow this popsicle stand,” Clint said, grinning widely as he climbed in. Nat followed him and raised her eyebrow. Phil had a tiny smile on his face as he put the truck in gear and pulled out.

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“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Cut the ’sir’ crap and sit down.” Phil sat in one of Nick Fury’s notoriously uncomfortable guest chairs.

“So, I guess you think you’re pretty pleased with yourself. Not only does your newly-minted Strike Team mount an operation to rescue two of our Agents, an operation which, on paper, should have taken a minimum of a dozen men to pull off successfully, but they rescue six other prisoners, half of whom have very useful intel which they gladly shared with SHIELD.” Fury was leaning back in his chair, his fingered steepled together in front of him.

“It was a successful operation, yes.”

“It was a fucking home run, and you know it.”

“Did you call me in here so I could watch you gloat?” Phil asked.

“No. I called you in here to make sure you take credit for this. Strike Team Delta was formed on your say-so. You saw the potential in Barton from the beginning when no one else did. And you realized that putting him and Romanoff together on an independent team was the best way for SHIELD to use her skills.”

Phil didn’t think Nick expected a reply to that, so he didn’t say anything.

“I can’t give you another promotion, and I’ve already given you a raise, but we both know how little that means to you. You did good, Cheese. If there’s anything you need, you come to me.” Nick held up his hand as Phil opened his mouth to say, ‘I already do that’.

“You’re going to say that you already do come to me. And you do. Sometimes. When it’s something for Barton, or some other agent who needs a hand. When you’re being stonewalled by HR or R&D and you know you’re right, you come to me. But you don’t when it’s something for yourself, Phil. You’ve never asked for a bigger office or Christmas off or access to the secret Captain America files.”

“I don’t need a bigger office or Christmas off,” Phil said. He liked his office, and what the hell was he going to do at Christmas except sit alone in his apartment?

Nick grinned, which was a little terrifying.

“All I’m saying, is that it’s okay to take a bow and bask in the glory a little once in a while. You deserve it.”

“I’m just doing my job, Nick,” Phil said, and as Nick opened his mouth, this time Phil preempted him. “But I wouldn’t say ‘no’ to a look at the files on Captain Rogers.”
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This time Fury threw his head back and laughed. “I’ll authorize it. See Sato in records tomorrow. Oh, and here’s your team’s next assignment. Hope you like goulash.”

Phil caught the folder that Nick slid across the desk at him. Apparently, they were headed for Belgrade.

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They’d been chasing their mark through the streets of Belgrade for over three hours. Well, not ‘chasing’ exactly, but following, using three-man tag-team surveillance. They had every advantage. They had comms, and Clint’s eyes, and Phil’s experience, and Natasha’s ability to disappear. But the guy was good, and also they couldn’t drop him in the middle of a crowded street. They didn’t want to lose him, either, so they had to keep following and wait for an opportunity.

They finally managed to box him in when he ducked into an alley with Phil on his heels. Nat was blocking the far end, and Clint stepped out from behind a dumpster and raised his bow.

The guy backed up, and kept backing up until he was half-way down the alley, as far from Nat at one end, and Clint and Phil at the other as he could get.

“At your discretion, Agent Barton,” Phil said formally.

Just as Clint nocked an arrow, a door banged open. Phil ducked behind the dumpster and stifled the urge to pull Clint down with him.

“You let me go or this kid buys it,” the mark said, having grabbed the unfortunate bicycle courier who’d picked the wrong place to be at the wrong time.

“Can you get a clear shot?” Phil asked.

Clint was half-concealed behind the dumpster, aiming his bow at their mark. “Not clear enough to be sure he won’t get a shot off and kill the kid.”

“Romanoff?” Phil asked over the comms.

“Sorry, sir. I can’t see the hostage well enough from where I am.”

“Understood, Agent.”

“We can’t just let him walk out of here, Phil. If we do the kid’s as good as dead.” Clint was right. The man they’d been hunting was a ruthless killer who wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet into his hostage.

“You’ve got five seconds to start backing off, or he’s dead,” the mark said.

“I’m going to try to get into a better position,” Nat said over the comms. *“He can’t see me moving behind him.”*
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“I’ve got a better idea,” Clint said, and before Phil could stop him, he lowered his bow and stepped out into plain sight.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the famous Hawkeye, with his little toy and everything!” said the mark.

“Barton what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Phil growled at him. Clint didn’t answer.

“Let the kid go. He’s not part of this,” Clint said. He had his bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, but both of his arms were at his sides.

“But you are, aren’t you. You and the red-head and the one who looks like an accountant. And you you think you have me trapped, like a rat in a maze. But you’ll let me go, or this kid pays the price.”

“You piece of shit,” Clint said in the bitterest tone Phil had ever heard him use. “You utter gaping asshole. You’re gonna kill him anyway, even though he’s no threat to you at all. I bet it makes you feel strong, like a big man, to kill a defenseless kid. Were you picked on as a child? Your momma didn’t love you? Is that why you turned into the piece of human garbage that’s standing in front of me now?” While he talked, Clint had been taking a few, small steps forward, putting pressure on the man at the same time as pissing him off.

“Shut up. You shut the fuck up,” the mark yelled.

“Oh yeah? Make me,” Clint said with a sneer.

Phil watched as the mark’s gun turned away from the kid’s head and pointed at Clint instead. Later, he would swear that Clint had waited until the man was actually squeezing the trigger before bringing his bow up and shooting him through the eye.

He saw the boy tear free and then the mark’s head exploded like a ripe cantaloupe as Natasha put two bullets into it from behind. Phil turned back to where Clint had collapsed on the ground.

“Clint, are you hit? Talk to me,” Phil said as he frantically looked for injuries, and found, to his horror, a large seeping wound just below Clint’s collarbone. Clint was hurt. Badly. Without thinking, without caring what it might look like, Phil gathered Clint up into his arms. He pressed one hand to the wound, and used the other to smooth Clint's hair out of his face.

“Is the kid okay?” Clint asked, coughing up some frothy pink bubbles.

“Shh. Don’t try to talk. Yes, the kid is fine, you saved him, Clint.” Phil said, cradling Clint more closely in his arms. Nat was standing guard over them, guns drawn and ready to shoot anyone who approached who wasn’t wearing a paramedic’s uniform.

“Stupid idiot,” she muttered under her breath, and Phil heard her, but he didn’t say anything. Maybe it was stupid of Clint to take the chance he did when their mark grabbed a hostage. But Phil knew that in Clint’s place, he would have done exactly the same damn thing.

“Medics are on their way,” said Natasha, with a significant look at Phil, and a glance down at Clint. Then she turned her back on them both, whether for privacy or simply to stand guard

over a fallen comrade, Phil didn't know.

"You hear that, Clint? The medics are on their way. You're going to be just fine. Just hold on."

Clint's eyes fluttered open and he coughed weakly, then whispered, "It's been an honor–" then coughed again, and closed his eyes.

"No," Phil held him tightly. "No, you're not going to die on me. Hold on, just hold on, Please. Please don't die on me Clint," Phil whispered into Clint's hair. "Please. I love you."

Then there was shouting and a uniformed medic was kneeling beside him and easing Clint's body out of his arms. Phil watched as the paramedic hooked up oxygen and an IV and injected Clint with a clotting factor and a heart stimulant and put a dressing on the entry wound. He was still kneeling on the ground when they lifted Clint onto a stretcher and backed the ambulance into the alley. Natasha stood next to him and held out her hand. He let her help him up, and was grateful to her for continuing to watch the medics and the ambulance while he wiped the tears out of his eyes.

"He's young, and strong. He has a chance," Natasha said with her usual pragmatism. "I'll contact SHIELD and get medical transport arranged for as soon as the doctors here say it's safe to move him. Go with him." Nat nudged Phil towards the back of the ambulance where the medics were strapping the gurney down.

"Thank you," Phil said.

"He's my friend too. Go."

Phil went.

And spent the next twelve hours sitting in a chair in a corridor. Nat appeared after the first four and brought him coffee and food, then disappeared again. She re-appeared six hours later with a woman in a white coat.

"This is Dr. Gabinski, Clint's surgeon."

Phil didn't even bother to wonder how Nat had found the surgeon, who had probably been on her way to the showers or cafeteria.

"Your… friend is in critical but stable condition. The bullet fragmented in his left lung, which caused extensive bleeding. We were able to repair it, however, with minimal loss of lung tissue. He is an… athlete?"

"He… he trains extensively for his job," Phil said.

The surgeon nodded. "His heart and lungs are in peak condition, very strong. This is how he survived long enough for me to operate. For now he is on a ventilator to keep the pressure on his lungs as low as possible. There are many things that could go wrong, infection, pneumonia, blood clots. I tell you this because I want you to consider carefully your intention to move him."

Phil nodded. “How soon?” He was sure that Dr. Gabinski was an excellent surgeon, and the facilities here in Belgrade were good, but he trusted SHIELD Medical.

“Under normal circumstances, I would say a week, but Ms. Romanoff has explained that you have access to… specialized transport equipment. Three days. By then he will be conscious and healing, with luck.”

Phil rubbed a tired hand across his face. “Can I see him? I… We have paperwork. I’m his next of kin,” Phil said, his voice shaking and threatening to break.

“Of course, but not until he is moved from recovery to intensive care. I will send a nurse to take you.” The doctor nodded at Natasha, and left.

“One of the SHIELD doctors is on his way,” Natasha said. “I’ve moved all our gear to the safe-house, but it’s across town. I’ll arrange for somewhere closer for us to stay.”

“Yes. Here, get rooms in the nearest hotel.” Phil dug his SHIELD credit card out of his wallet and handed it to her. “And Natasha,” he said as she was turning to leave, “thank you.”

She just inclined her head and blinked at him, as if to say, ‘You’re an idiot too.’

A couple of hours after Nat left, a nurse appeared and led him to the ICU. There were only two patients in the eight-bed ward, and they were at opposite ends, presumably to give the families some semblance of privacy. There was a man and a woman standing by the bed at the other end of the ward, speaking in a low monotone that Phil assumed was a prayer. He turned his attention to Clint’s bed.

The machines and tubes and wires didn’t bother him, Phil was used to the paraphernalia of serious injury. It was how pale and lifeless Clint looked. Phil glanced up at the heart monitor for reassurance. It beeped regularly.

“May I?” Phil gestured towards where one of Clint’s hands lay on top of the covers.

“Da,” the nurse said. She smiled softly at him, and went back to her station.

Feeling like he was taking a liberty, Phil picked up Clint’s hand and held it in both of his. It was warm and felt strong, even though Clint was unconscious. Phil traced the roughened calluses from Clint’s bow-grip with his thumb. It felt wrong—much too intimate—but he couldn’t stop himself. This was probably the only chance he’d ever get to touch Clint like this, and he was going to take it, even if it was wrong. So he held Clint’s hand and stroked his fingers and drew strength and comfort from the solid weight of Clint’s hand in his.

Eventually, he leaned down closer to Clint’s head and spoke softly. “You’re going to be just fine, Clint. The surgeon here took all the bullet fragments out of your lung and stitched everything up. You just need to rest, and heal for a few days, and then we’ll fly you back home. I’ll be here the whole time, I promise. I won’t leave you.”

Phil was still holding Clint’s hand and now he raised it to his own face, brushing the backs of Clint’s fingers against his cheek, just once. Then he turned his head and kissed the back of

Clint's hand softly before laying it back down on the blanket. Phil straightened up, took a step back, and found the guest-chair by Clint's bed. He settled himself in it and watched the mechanically regular rise and fall of Clint's chest and listened to the soft beeping of the heart monitor. Eventually, he fell asleep.

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"Lean on me. It's okay, I've got you. One more step."

"I still think I would have been fine at my place," Clint said, though he had to stop and catch his breath halfway through his sentence.

"Your place doesn't have an elevator," Phil said. "There's no way you would have been able to manage the stairs."

"Sure I would, it just would have taken a while, that's all."

"Doctor Sanchez released you on the condition that you were staying with me, remember?" Phil unlocked his apartment door and shuffled them both carefully through it.

"Yeah, I know. But you didn't have to go to all the trouble, Phil."

"It's no trouble." Phil dropped Clint's duffle bag and kicked it to one side so that it would be out of the way.

"Sure, having me under your feet for two weeks until I can walk across the room without gasping for air. I'm gonna drive you crazy."

"We've been stuck in safe-houses together under much worse conditions. It will be fine," Phil said, then realized that Clint's complaining might not just be habit. "Here, sit down." Phil helped Clint onto the sofa, then knelt in front of him.

"Clint, if you'd really rather not be here…" He started, but realized that he had no idea how to finish the sentence.

"It's not that, I just don't want to be any trouble," Clint said with a sigh.

Phil shook his head at that. "You're not going to be any trouble, Clint. You're my friend. You'd do the same for me, right?"

"Yeah, of course I would."

"Well then," Phil said, ending the discussion. "I'm just going to grab your bag from the hall, then you can tell me what you want to order for supper."

Phil grabbed the duffle, carried it into the bedroom and dropped it on the bed, intending to unpack it for Clint later. Most of what it contained was clothes that he had fetched from Clint's apartment over the last few days while he was recovering in SHIELD medical. The rest was extra dressings and a device that Clint needed to use regularly to exercise his still-healing lung.
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He heard Clint's phone ring and tried not to listen in, wanting to give him some sense of privacy. Living together while they were on a mission was one thing, but this was going to be a different dynamic. He was going to have to tread carefully, for both their sakes.

Phil crossed to the kitchen and got a beer for himself and a bottle of juice for Clint, then grabbed a stack of take-out flyers out of the drawer.

"Nat says 'Hi' and she'll call you later," Clint said, dropping his phone on the sofa cushion.

"Good. What do you want to eat?"

"Indian. Something hot enough to set my tonsils on fire. The food in medical was so damn bland."

"You hardly ate one of Medical's meals a day, what with Nat and Jasper bringing you food all the time," Phil said.

"You brought me food, too. You brought me burgers and fries every other day," Clint pointed out.

"Yes, well, the food in Medical is pretty boring. Indian it is. Here," Phil handed Clint the flyers, "you know what I like, you order while I go unpack your things."

"I can–" Clint started, but Phil fixed him with a stern glare.

"No, you can't. You can't bend over and you can't carry anything. Not for another week. It's fine Clint, really."

"Yeah, okay." Clint started to peruse the take-out menu and picked up his phone.

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The next morning Phil was making coffee while Clint was in the bathroom. Phil was listening for any sign of a problem, so when he heard, 'Ow, fuck,' he dropped what he was doing and hurried to the closed bathroom door.

"Clint, are you okay?"

"I'm fi- Fuck!"

Phil opened the door to find Clint standing at the sink, one hand gripping the counter and the other trying to staunch the trickle of blood coming from a cut on his chin. His face was half-shaved, and his razor was in the sink where he'd obviously dropped it when he cut himself.

"Here, let me." Phil moved in close and took the bit of tissue out of Clint's hand. He ran it under cold water, then pressed it to the cut.

"I'm not used to shaving with only one hand, but I can't stand up for long enough without holding onto something. Fuck I hate being this weak."
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“I know. Sit down.” Phil said, indicating the lid of the toilet.

“I need to finish,” Clint protested. “My face is getting itchy as fuck, and being half-shaved is gonna be even worse.”

“Sit down, I’ll finish for you.” Phil put a hand on Clint’s elbow for support as he shuffled over to the toilet and sat down.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t, but I’m going to anyway. Unless you don’t trust me to put a blade to your face?” Phil raised his eyebrows at Clint.

“Shit, Phil, I’d trust you to put a gun to my head, you know that.” Clint snorted a laugh. “Go ahead then.” He tipped his head to the side to give Phil a better view of the unshaven half of his face.

“Just a sec, let me…” Phil retrieved Clint’s razor, then ran water into the sink, checking the temperature and dropping a washcloth in to soak as well. He wrung it out and wiped Clint’s face, then applied some of Clint’s shaving cream to his damp skin. He rinsed the razor, and put his left hand on Clint’s forehead, tipping it back a little.

“Okay?” he asked, blade poised.

“Go for it.”

Shaving someone else felt odd, Phil thought as he carefully swiped the blade from just below Clint’s left ear to his chin. On the one hand it demanded careful, clinical precision. On the other… Clint was holding still and breathing evenly, but Phil couldn’t help but be hyper-aware of the closeness and warmth of his body in the small bathroom. Clint’s skin was warm and soft under his hand and Phil wanted to stroke it, caress it. It had been so damn long since he’d touched someone, not counting the few moments he'd spent holding Clint's hand in the hospital.

And the bitch of it was that Phil knew if he explained, if he told Clint everything, Clint would probably even let him. Let Phil touch him, just stroke his skin for a minute. But there would be sadness, or worse, pity in Clint’s eyes, and Phil couldn’t bear the thought of seeing that.

So he focused on making straight smooth passes with the razor, carefully shaving the other half of Clint’s face, then wiping it clean with the warm cloth.

“There, how’s that?” Phil asked, stepping back to admire his handiwork.

“It’s great, Phil. Thanks.” And Clint smiled a big, bright, happy smile that had Phil turning back to the sink to rinse the cloth and Clint’s razor to cover his feelings.

“Good. That’s good. You going to be okay to make it back to the sofa, or do you need a hand?”

“I’m fine.” Clint said, standing, but keeping one hand on the corner of the bathroom counter for balance. “I’ll get out of your hair so that you won’t be late for work.”

“Oh, I’m not going in today. I’m working from home for the next few days. Just until you’re steadier on your feet.”

“Phil, I’m fine. You don’t need to stay home just for me.” Clint was making his way across the living room and settled onto the sofa where there was already a pile of books and his phone and a cup of coffee on the table within easy reach.

“Hey, you nearly died on me. That means I’m allowed to keep an eye on you for a couple of days,” Phil said sharply, his tone at odds with the sentiment of his words. Clint picked up on that.

“I’m sorry. About the almost dying part, I mean,” he said, looking up and Phil who was still standing in the bathroom doorway. “I wasn’t scared, you know, which is weird, because last time I was bleeding to death in an alleyway I was fucking terrified, but this time I wasn’t scared, ‘cause you were there. And Nat too, but mostly you. I knew I’d done the right thing. I could hear it in your voice, so I was okay with it.” Clint stared ahead of himself as he spoke, almost as if he’d forgotten Phil was there, but then he turned his head. “I’m sorry though, for scaring you.”

It was a testament to how close they’d become in the last year that Clint knew exactly what to say.

“It’s okay. Just don’t do it again.”

“Don’t worry. Not planning on it. It’s way too much hassle,” Clint said, absently rubbing at the taped edges of the bandage over his chest. He hadn’t bothered to put on a shirt, Phil realized, probably because he thought Phil would be leaving, and the shirt would just catch on the bandage.

Clint saw him looking. “Sorry, I’ll go grab a shirt,” he said, levering himself back up.

He half-way to standing when Phil said, “Clint, it’s fine, really. It doesn’t bother me at all. Sit down.”

“You sure? ‘Cause I don’t mind. I just thought you’d be going to work, that’s all.”

“It’s fine. Really. My issues are about me, not other people.”

“Okay, then. Thanks.”

Phil nodded, relieved that Clint hadn’t pushed the matter. “Do you want peanut butter or jelly on your toast?” he asked, and when Clint turned puppy dog eyes on him, he laughed. “Both. Of course. Coming right up.”

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“Stop fiddling with it, you’ll get it all wrinkled,” Nat hissed as they walked arm-in-arm down the hallway of an opulent chateau.

“It’s too tight,” Clint hissed back through the corner of his mouth.

“It’s not too tight, it’s perfect. I know this because Coulson tied it for you.”

“He’s better at it than I am.”

“I’m better at it than you are. Six weeks of training for this assignment and we didn’t find out until yesterday that you don’t know how to tie a bow-tie. I thought you were good with knots,” Natasha said.

“I am. I’m great at knots. The kind you rig tightropes and circus tents with, not the kind that go on stupid-assed ties that you have to wear with these ridiculous monkey suits.”

“This dress isn’t exactly the most comfortable thing, but do you see me squirming?”

“Yeah, well you’ve had a lot more practice being dressed-up than I have.”

“Just quit fiddling with the collar. I didn’t spend six weeks teaching you to tango and letting you step on my toes so you could blow our cover by looking like your tie was choking you.”

“I only stepped on your toes that one time,” Clint knew he was whining a little, now, but it was true, he’d only stepped on Nat’s feet once while they practiced, partly because she’d looked daggers at him when he did it, and partly because he’d actually picked up the dance moves fairly quickly. Between his natural coordination and the acrobatics he’d done in the circus, learning to ballroom dance hadn’t been difficult, and had actually been kinda fun. More fun that learning which was the right fork to use for escargot, anyway.

They stepped into the ballroom and Clint had to consciously keep his pace even with Nat’s, because he wanted to a) stop and stare, and then b) run away. The room was full of well-dressed men and women, standing around in small groups chatting and drinking champagne out of expensive-looking glasses. Nat steered them unobtrusively across the room until they were standing by a pillar, and Clint relaxed a fraction once it was at his back.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile that Nat didn’t see because she was glancing around the room.

“Coulson, we’re in position. Looking for the target now,” she said quietly into her comms.

That reminded Clint why they were here and he started to scan the crowd.

“The tall white-haired guy talking to the woman in the poofy orange dress is carrying,” he said softly to Nat.

“Yes, and the two standing over by the chocolate fountain are bodyguards, probably for the short fat guy with the red bow tie over there.” Nat pointed discreetly with her chin. “I still don’t see the target, though.”

“Me either. Maybe she hasn’t arrived yet?” Clint clicked his tongue to turn his comms on. *“Coulson, do we have any idea if the target is supposed to be here yet? We haven’t spotted her.”*

“No update in the intelligence, Barton. You’re just going to have to keep an eye out and spot her if she shows.”

“No problem, boss,” Clint said with a smile that he knew would carry across the comm link, then clicked it off again.

“Come on, let’s put all that practice to work and dance. It’ll look less suspicious than just lurking here all evening,” Nat said, taking his hand and leading him towards the dance floor.

There was a waltz playing and Clint was glad to start slow. But he quickly realized that he and Natasha were one of the better couples on the dance floor, and within a few minutes they had reached an unspoken understanding to be careful not to stand out by looking too flashy. Which also meant they could pay less attention to their dancing and more to the rest of the guests at the party.

“So, you and Coulson?” Nat said quietly into his ear and they swayed around the dance floor.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not asking for any details, but if there’s something going on between you, I’d like to know.”

“What? No. We’re just friends. Good friends. That’s all.”

“But that’s not all you want,” Natasha said, giving him a knowing look.

“You know better than I do that you don’t always get what you want. Especially in this business,” Clint said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“Why not? I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He’s interested, you can’t tell me he’s not. If there is some stupid regulation because of the chain of command-”

“No. It’s not that. It’s… Something happened. A long time ago. And he doesn’t… he just doesn’t. Look, it’s not my… That’s all I can say.”

“I’m sorry.”

“S’okay. He’s my best friend, and I’m lucky to have that.”

“Nine o’clock,” Natasha said, and Clint swung her around so he could see.

“Got her.” Clint clicked his tongue. *“Boss, we’ve got the target in sight.”*

“Good. Don’t lose her.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t.”

The plan was to follow the mark back to wherever she was staying and then locate the package she was supposed to be carrying. So they danced and they ate and they stayed as unobtrusively close to her as they could throughout the evening. When the party ended and she left, Phil replaced the limo driver in line behind hers and drove Clint and Nat to the fancy hotel she was staying at. It took Nat a few minutes with her phone to negotiate with the hotel's online reservation app, so that by the time she and Clint walked in, arm in arm, they already had a suite booked.

From there it was a simple matter of spotting her, following her to her room, then waiting until she left so that they could toss it. Except no package. Nothing incriminating at all, in fact. They went back to their room and met Coulson.

"Is it possible she passed it off at the party?" he asked.

Clint and Nat both closed their eyes.

"There was the guy in the blue suit, with the yellow tie. She danced with him once," said Nat.

"And the woman in the green dress. She bumped into her getting up from the table," added Clint. Nat nodded.

"Anyone else you can think of?" Coulson asked.

"No. But I wasn't looking for her to do a hand off, specifically."

"If there was something to see, one of you would have seen it," Coulson said confidently, and even after all this time, Coulson's appreciation for his skills made Clint feel warm inside.

"So, it seems to me that the best thing is for you two to split up, Natasha takes the guy in the blue suit, and Clint follows the woman in the green dress. I'll get the tech department to run the surveillance tapes through the facial recognition algorithm, cross-match them with the guest list, and as soon as we have names and locations for them, you're on.

Nat nodded, and headed for the bedroom of the suite to change out of her ballgown. Clint didn't move.

"Problem Barton?" Coulson asked mildly, raising an eyebrow.

"If we're splitting up, which one of us are you going with?" Clint asked.

"Neither. If I'm running you both on an active op, I'll need to do it from base. We'll be in comms contact all the time, though. Don't worry it'll be fine."

"Yeah, okay," said Clint, but he wasn't happy about it. It wasn't that he wasn't confident in his skills. Even though Nat was the master spy, he had street sense and experience and a whole bunch of SHIELD training to back that up. It was just that he was used to Coulson being there on an op. Being nearby, at least, in a comms van or waiting at a safe-house. Knowing that this time, Phil wouldn't be there… it put Clint on edge a little. But he'd cope. He'd be fine.

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A week later he was fine. Bored, sick and tired of playing nice with Samantha (the lady in the green dress), and desperately missing his bow and the target range, but fine. He'd tossed her apartment the night after they'd identified her. He hadn't found the package SHIELD was after, but he had found enough incriminating evidence to suggest that she might be some sort of courier or go-between, which was why he'd had to stay close to her. He and Phil had engineered a 'chance meeting' at a fancy restaurant where Clint's 'date' failed to appear, and he'd struck up a conversation. From there it was easy enough to get invited to a cocktail party that she was throwing that Friday, and so on. He'd been careful not to move to fast, to listen carefully and to drop subtle hints into their conversations that they might be in the same business.

It was going well, but Clint was lonely and bored and wanted to go home. And that thought brought him up short because he hadn't thought of anywhere as 'home' since he was eight years old. But he wanted to go back to New York. To his apartment, and SHIELD, and Phil. He missed Phil with a dull ache that he was able to ignore most of the time, but now, at 10:30 p.m. on a Wednesday night, alone in Washington D.C. in a rented fully furnished condo, playing a character a million miles away from who he really was…

Clint stripped off the suit jacket and tie he'd been wearing and kicked off his shoes. He grabbed his phone, checked the charge, and flopped down on the king-sized bed. Before he could talk himself out of it, he dialed Phil's number.

"Clint, what's wrong?" Phil's voice as he answered was high with concern.

"Nothing. Nothing, everything's fine. Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you, I just…" Clint trailed off, feeling stupid.

"What is it?"

"I, uh, I guess I'm just feeling a little homesick and I just wanted to hear a friendly voice, but if you're busy or something–"

"No. No, it's fine. I was just finishing up some paperwork."

"You're still at the office?"

"No, I brought some things home. Running you and Natasha separately on this op means double the paperwork."

"How's Nat doing?" Clint asked, glad of having something to talk about.

"Fine. She's actually wrapping up and coming back tomorrow, we've decided that the guy she'd been following was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Wish I was coming back tomorrow."

"Clint, are you okay?" Phil asked gently, and Clint sighed.
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“I’m fine. Really. I… just… I was on my own for a long time, and I was okay with it. But the past few years I guess I’ve gotten used to having people around. Colleagues and… friends. God, I sound totally lame,” Clint laughed at himself. “It’s only been a week.”

“You’re allowed to feel lonely when you haven’t seen anyone you know for a week.”

“Yeah, I guess. So, tell me all the office gossip. Did that new agent, what’s-her-name? Garcia? Did she manage to prank Jasper?”

“It was epic,” Phil said, laughing, and started to describe the way the junior agent had set Sitwell’s office chair on fire.

Clint felt himself relaxing. Just listening Phil’s voice, hearing the warmth in it. Imagining the small smile on Phil’s face and the sparkle in his eyes, it made Clint feel warm and happy.

They chatted for a while longer, until Clint heard Phil stifling a yawn and turned to look at the clock. It was past midnight.

“Shit Phil, sorry for keeping you up. I didn’t realize how late it was.”

“That’s okay, I really don’t mind.” Now Phil’s voice was a little fuzzy with tiredness. Clint thought it sounded adorable.

“Yeah, well I should let you go. Thanks for… y’know, being there.”

“Always, Clint. Always.”

And Clint knew that Phil mostly meant that he was always on call during an op. But the tone of his voice made it sound like more. Like Phil was also saying that he’d always be there for Clint, and in a part of his heart he desperately wanted that to be true.

“Yeah. I know. G’night Phil.”

“Goodnight Clint.”

Clint got up, got undressed, set the alarms, turned out the lights. Then he climbed back into bed and curled himself into a tight ball.

He wasn’t sure when his feeling had tipped from liking, respecting, and being attracted to Phil, over into full blown love, but there was no doubt that it had happened. That there was no other word for what he felt. He knew he and Phil couldn’t be together, and why, but that didn’t change how he felt. He was just going to have to learn to live with it, somehow.

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“How’re they doing?”

“Okay, for the most part. A couple show real talent. I think I’m gonna recommend busting Daniels out, though. He’s too much of a show off; doesn’t take the training seriously; thinks he already knows everything.”
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Phil looked at Clint without saying anything for a minute.

“Hey, I did know more than the SHIELD instructors when I was training as a sniper. And I never complained about training. Daniels doesn’t want to do any hard work, he just wants the accolades.”

Phil nodded. “Okay, so what’s next?”

“Well, I’d like to set up an exercise. One that’s as realistic as possible. The way we do things now, newly certified snipers go out as backup on missions, and sometimes they end up having to take the shot. I don’t think that’s necessarily the best way to prepare them.”

“Keep talking.” Phil’s eyes and body language said he was clearly interested in what Clint was saying.

“So they don’t necessarily learn to judge the situation very well themselves, at first, because they’re deferring to the handler leading the op, and the more senior sniper they’re working with. I thought an exercise or two where they had to use not only the skills that we’re teaching them, but their judgement, would prepare them better for missions.”

By the time Clint had finished talking, Phil was nodding along with him. “Write up a proposal, and I’ll take it to Hill.”

“What do you mean?”

“Write up a formal proposal to add the exercises you just described to the SHIELD sniper certification program.”

“Well, I didn’t mean we should change the program, just that–”

“Clint, do you believe that this idea of yours will make for better trained SHIELD agents?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then do the right thing. Write up a formal proposal. I’ll help you with it if you want, of course, but it’ll have your name on it, not mine. And then I’ll take it to Commander Hill for her approval.”

“Okay. Yeah, okay.” Clint grinned suddenly. “Knew you’d find a way to give me more paperwork to do,” he said. Then, “You want to grab lunch? It’s meatloaf day in the caf.”

Phil looked up at him with a small smile. “Sounds good. Give me five minutes to finish these expense reports.”

Clint flopped down onto Phil’s office sofa and pulled out his phone. There was an email from Nat which he replied to quickly, and another with a question from one of his trainees. He answered that one as well, and by the time he was done, Phil was standing up and shrugging his suit jacket on. Clint bit back the urge to tease him about it, since he now had a good idea why Phil felt more comfortable with an extra layer between him and the world.

Lunch was their usual amiable affair with Clint complaining about the food, regaling Phil with his latest kitchen escapades, and promising him a dinner invitation soon, marred by interruptions as people spotted Coulson and came over to talk to him.

They were nearly finished when a young trainee came up to their table and said, “Sir?”

“Yes, Agent?” said Coulson looking up.

“Willis,” Clint supplied. The young man was one of the trainees in his sniper classes.

“Um, actually, sir I meant…” Agent Willis turned a delicate pink as he gestured towards Clint.

Phil’s eyebrows went up, and his lips quirked in what Clint knew would be a smile if they were alone.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt your lunch, Agent Barton, sir, but, uh, a few of us were wondering if you would be willing to give us some extra training on the range, this afternoon?” Willis glanced over to where three other junior agents were sitting at a table, rather obviously giggling like a group of high-school students (or at least like the high school students Clint had seen on TV, anyway).

“Let me check my schedule, Willis.” Clint pulled out his phone and checked his calendar app. “I’m not free this afternoon, but I’ve got an hour at 11am tomorrow, if that works for you?”

“Yeah, uh, I mean yes. That would be great. Thank you, sir.”

Willis hurried away, his ears still red, and Clint looked up at Phil with an expression that dared him to say anything.

“So, how does it feel?”

“Embarrassing, mostly. Some of those kids get awfully hero-worshippy, and it’s a pain in the ass,” Clint said.

“But you still agreed to help them.”

“Well, yeah, of course. What kind of an asshole wouldn’t? Besides, the better trained they are, the less chance they have of getting themselves killed on their first mission.”

A shadow passed over Phil’s face, and Clint wished he hadn’t said anything. But then Phil looked up at him, his eyes serious. “You’re a good man, Clint Barton, and a good Agent.”

Clint felt himself blushing a little under Phil’s steady gaze, and tried to make a joke, but couldn’t. He didn’t want to laugh off Phil’s praise. Knowing that Phil held him in such high esteem made him feel warm inside. So he held Phil’s eyes and said, “Thank you,” before dropping his gaze to his lunch tray. “Well, I’ve got to get going. My boss just gave me an assignment that involves a lot of research and paperwork.”

Phil smiled then, widely. “Any help you need with that, my door is always open.”

And Clint had to tear his eyes away from the warmth in Phil's. "I know, thanks. Catch you later."

The next day, he met with the group of trainees, as promised, and spent an hour taking them through their paces on the range. He offered a correction here, some advice there, all laced with liberal amounts of encouragement and praise. A million miles from how he'd been trained by Trickshot in the circus, but instead how he'd learned from Phil and a few other senior Agents at SHIELD. When the session ended, the trainees were all smiling, satisfied with their work and their progress.

As they packed up their gear and headed for the showers, Agent Willis hung back and waylaid Clint.

"Sir? Uh, I mean, Agent Barton? I, ah, was wondering if you'd be interested in going for coffee?" Willis' ears went pink, and Clint carefully kept his face still. The kid was going to have to get over this hero-worship thing fast, but annoying as it was, Clint wasn't going to laugh at him for it.

"Is the group going out?" Clint asked, glancing towards where the rest of the junior agents had disappeared. "Sure, when?"

"Uh, no. That is. I mean. Not with the group. Just, ah, with me." Willis blushed harder.

Clint's first instinct was to turn the young man down in the kindest, gentlest way possible. But he didn't. Instead he thought about it for a second. Willis was young, sure, but he was bright and good looking and, well, he'd understand when Clint was away for days at a time on missions. And since he couldn't be with Phil, a little voice in the corner of his mind said… So he smiled warmly, and said, "I'd like that. When were you thinking?"

"I, uh… that is I…"

"Didn't expect me to say yes, so you hadn't thought that far ahead," Clint said, letting the poor kid off the hook. He took his phone out of his pocket and leaned against the wall. "Let's see. I've got a meeting with R&D tomorrow at nine, and then range time until noon, then I'm having lunch with Coulson." That wasn't actually technically in Clint's schedule, but these days he and Coulson had lunch together every day that they were both free, and Clint wasn't willing to give that up. "A meeting with R&D from thirteen-hundred to fourteen-hundred, training with Agent Romanoff from fourteen-hundred to sixteen-hundred. I'm free after that. I'll need to shower and change, though, so how's sixteen-thirty?"

"Um. Great. 4:30. Tomorrow. I'll, uh… I guess I'll see you then," Willis stammered.

Clint gave him an easy grin. "Yep."

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Clint realized something was seriously wrong the third time he thought to himself, 'I can't wait to tell Phil about that.' The last time he'd been on a date, which admittedly, was a while ago, he seemed to remember paying more attention to the guy he was on the date with, and
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less time thinking about talking to Phil later. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with Paul, he was intelligent and good-looking. He just… wasn't Phil, Clint realized with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. His undercover training meant nothing showed on his face, he smiled and nodded in all the right places, but his mind was miles away from the coffee shop. It was in Phil's apartment, sitting on Phil's sofa, eating pizza off Phil's coffee table and watching reality shows on Phil's TV. That's where he wanted to be. Not here.

Time to face the fact that he had it bad for Phil Coulson, the one person he could never have. But Phil cared about him, cared deeply. He knew that. And he loved Phil. With all his heart and soul, he loved Phil, and if all he could ever have was the close friendship that they had developed over the last five years, then Clint was okay with that. He'd always wanted someone in his life. Someone to be with. Someone who knew him and cared about him, someone he could spend time with and make happy and enjoy being with. That someone was Phil. He'd miss touching, and sex, but he could figure out a way to get that elsewhere. Companionship he wanted from Phil. He realized that now.

He smiled kindly at Paul, and apologized and explained, in the broadest possible terms. ("Thank you for asking me out. I had a really nice time, but I've realized that I'm not in a position to date right now. It's not you. It's me. I'm very sorry.") He felt bad about the blow it obviously was to Paul, but he couldn't think of any way to soften it. Better to be honest and up-front now, rather than drag it out. He thanked Paul again for the coffee, paid the tab, and left.

Then he spent a couple of hours walking around the city, just thinking. He loved Phil. He was in love with Phil. He couldn't do anything about being in love with Phil, because he couldn't have a romantic relationship with Phil. He was going to have to get good at dealing with that. Fast. Because what he wanted more than anything right now was to head over to Phil's apartment and flop down on his sofa and have Phil look at him with that little quirk of a smile. Instead he went home and had a long shower and went to bed with a book about the history of archery that Phil had gotten him for his birthday last year.

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When Clint got to work the next morning there was a meeting alert in his calendar: Meeting with P. Coulson and N. Fury; 10:00; Location: Dir. Fury's office. Clint stared at it for a whole 60 seconds before heading to Phil's office. On the way there he tried to think of anything he'd done lately that warranted a meeting with Fury. He hadn't screwed up, he was pretty sure. Maybe he wasn't supposed to be tutoring the junior snipers? No, Phil would have told him if that was the case. His 'date' with Willis? Shit, had Willis accused him of sexual harassment or something out of spite? Surely not, he seemed like a decent guy, and besides, the kid didn't have the balls to pull something like that off.

Clint knocked his usual rat-a-tat-tat on Phil's door as he strode into his office. Phil was working on something, staring intently at his computer monitor. Clint had an impulse to walk around behind him, find out what it was and if it had anything to do with him, but instead he planted himself in front of Phil's desk and waited.

A few seconds later, Phil looked up, and smiled. Clint's heart did a little flip-flop, and he suddenly wished he'd thought to bring a cup of coffee or a donut for Phil.
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“Morning, Clint, what’s up?”

“Uh, this meeting with Fury, what’s it about?”

Phil’s brow crinkled and he looked back at his monitor, clicking the mouse a couple of times. “Doesn’t say.”

“Yeah, I know, that’s why I came to ask you.” Clint was getting more and more worried.

“Well, my guess is that either we’re getting an eyes-only mission, or it’s about your sniper training proposal.”

“But you said you’d give that to Hill.” Had Phil given it to Fury instead, and maybe asked him to approve it as a favor?

“I did. Hill might have bumped it up to Fury if she felt it was warranted.” Phil didn’t seem worried about it, and that reassured Clint a little.

“Oh. Probably a mission, though, right?”

“Probably. We’ll find out at ten, anyway.”

“Yeah. Okay. I guess I’ll see you then. I gotta go re-schedule my range time.”

At two minutes to ten, Clint was leaning on the wall in the hallway that led to Fury’s office, waiting for Phil. He’d been waiting for five minutes, just to make sure he got there before Phil so that they could go into Fury’s office together. Not that he was intimidated by Fury or anything. If he knew what this damn meeting was about, he’d be totally fine just strolling in. It was the not knowing that made him nervous.

Coulson came around the corner and didn’t even break stride when he saw Clint leaning up against the wall. He even gave Clint a little half smile and an ‘okay then, let’s do this’ nod, as if he’d expected Clint to be there. Clint grinned nervously at him, and fell into step.

“Gentlemen,” said Fury when they’d stopped in front of his huge desk.

“Sir,” said Phil. Clint just nodded.

“Deputy Director Hill passed your proposal for advanced sniper training on to me for evaluation,” Fury said, fixing Clint with a hard stare. Clint kept his face impassive and his body perfectly still. He was only a little nervous. There couldn’t be anything badly wrong with his proposal, Phil had read it, twice. Fury turned to Coulson. “How much of it did you write?”

“None, sir. I read Agent Barton’s first draft, and made a few suggestions, but the document is entirely his own work.”

Fury gave a small, satisfied nod. “And it’s exemplary work. Agent Barton, based on this, and on your performance both in the field and as an instructor over the past year, I am officially promoting you to Level 5. Congratulations.”

Clint blinked. He was pretty sure this wasn't how SHIELD promotions were usually handled. When he'd been promoted from Level 3 to Level 4, eighteen months ago, Phil had told him. Clint glanced at Phil out of the corner of his eye, and could see the carefully-concealed surprise. Phil hadn't known about this.

Fury had his hand out to shake, and Clint stepped forward and took it. Fury's grip was firm and strong, and the look in his eye held more warmth than Clint had ever seen.

"Thank you, sir," Clint said, but all he got in response was another nod, as Fury glanced over at Phil with what seemed to be a significant look.

"Do you have time to squeeze the implementation of Agent Barton's sniper training program into your schedule, Cheese, or do you want me to assign it to someone else?"

"I can handle it, sir," Phil said a little stiffly.

"I'm sure you can. Keep up the good work, both of you. Dismissed."

Clint's head was reeling a little as they left Fury's office, and he followed Phil back to his, flopping gratefully onto the sofa as Phil sat behind his desk, then stared off into space for a minute.

"That was weird," Clint said. "That was weird, right?"

"It wasn't normal procedure, no, but then again Director Fury only follows procedure when it suits him." Phil was silent a minute, still staring unseeing at the bookshelf in the corner of his office, then he abruptly got out of his chair.

"Congratulations, Clint. Sorry, I didn't say it earlier." He stuck out his hand and Clint scrambled off the sofa to stand beside Phil's so he could take it without having to reach across the desk.

Phil brought his other hand up to cover Clint's as they shook. 'Because he can't hug me, I guess,' thought Clint. And once he'd had the thought, he suddenly, desperately wanted a hug from Phil. Instead he squeezed the hand that was holding his, and put his own left hand over Phil's.

"Thanks, boss," he said, and gave Phil the warmest smile he could. Phil squeezed back and then let go. Clint released him reluctantly, and flopped back down on the sofa.

"So how does it feel to be a Senior Agent?" Phil asked, and suddenly, Clint panicked.

"It… uh, it doesn't change anything, does it? I mean, with Strike Team Delta or anything. You're still my… our handler, right?"

"In that I'll still be overseeing your missions, yes, I'm still your handler," Phil said, and Clint relaxed. "It mostly means that you'll be given more responsibility; running the advanced sniper training, for instance. You don't need me to sign off on your equipment requests any more. Don't abuse that."

“Aw, Phil, you know I wouldn’t!”

“I know you would, but not too much.” Phil grinned at him, and he grinned back. Things were gonna be okay.

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The op was a big one. Maybe the biggest Clint had ever been involved in, in his five years at SHIELD. It was so big, in fact, that Coulson wasn’t even in charge of it, Maria Hill was. He and Nat were part of an infiltration team that Hill was directing. Some of his baby snipers were outside, providing cover for the ‘distraction’ attack that would hopefully keep most of the HYDRA agents busy enough not to realize that they’d left the back door open, metaphorically speaking. Phil was overseeing the ‘distraction’, as well as communications and air support. Clint had never been more grateful for his hearing-aid/comms implant, and the ability to switch channels by clicking his tongue. It meant he could tune in to Coulson’s channel every so often, just to check. Or, if he was being honest with himself, just to hear Phil’s voice, calm and assured, talking nervous junior agents through their first big op, relaying information, and making sure everyone was where they were supposed to be and knew what they were supposed to do.

He couldn’t stay on Coulson’s channel for long, though, just a few seconds at a time, lest he miss an instruction to his team from Hill. They were working their way deeper and deeper into the HYDRA compound, running silent, he and Nat on point clearing the path for the small team of specialists who were disabling locks and dismantling booby traps and defeating electronic security systems.

“Blue Team Leader, report,” came Hill’s voice, and Clint did a quick sweep of the area before responding.

“We’re in sub-level 3, north-east quadrant. Still undetected, as far as I can tell.”

“Good. Report in when you’ve accessed the vault.”

“Acknowledged, Hawkeye out,” Clint said as a two-man HYDRA patrol came around a corner and he shot one through the throat while Nat dispatched the other with a kick to the head.

The next corridor turned out to be the one they’d been looking for, and after disabling yet another pair of guards, the tech team went to work on the door of the vault. Inside was, apparently, some very scary weapons technology that SHIELD figured HYDRA shouldn’t have. Clint checked in with Hill, then switched over to Coulson’s channel again, just for a second.

“You should keep your focus on our mission,” Nat said quietly.

“I am focused. I just want to know what’s going on up top. Could be important, later, when we’re on our way out of there,” Clint said. Nat gave him a look that said she didn’t believe a word of it. Clint was saved from a no-doubt cutting remark by the doors of the vault
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whooshing open. Clint and Nat spun, weapons raised, but there were no guards on the inside. They checked for booby traps and found none.

“Okay, grab the nasty stuff and let’s get out of here.” The two techs were hurriedly stuffing pieces of equipment into rucksacks.

“Hawkeye to Hill. The package is secure. We’re on our way out. Recommended route?”

“Patching you through to Red Team, they’re in the communications room and have eyes.”

“Roger. Red Team, go ahead.”

A voice on the comms that Clint didn’t recognize led them through the compound, avoiding the remaining guard patrols and keeping out of sight. They were almost at their exfil point when the voice said *“Fuck,”* and Clint heard gunshots.

“Red Team’s in trouble,” Clint said to Nat.

“I’ll go.”

“No, you need to make sure get the tech gets out,” Clint said, then changed to the air support channel to call the Quinjet in for retrieval. The channel was loud and busier than it had been last time Clint had checked in. Phil’s voice in the background was still calmly issuing orders, but it now had that slightly brittle edge that Clint recognized meant things were going badly topside.

He waited until he could hear the roar of the Quinjet engines, and then fist-bumped Nat. “See you back at base.”

“Don’t die.”

“Not planning on it,” he said, and headed for the comms room.

When he got there, Red Team was holding their own, but pinned down and out-gunned. A few strategically placed arrows (strategically placed in HYDRAS agents’ backs) evened the playing field, and within minutes the bad guys were all down and the three members of Red Team, including LeClaire, were licking their wounds.

“Thanks Barton,” she said as he helped wrap a bandage around a bullet hole in her upper arm.

“No prob–” Over her shoulder, on one of the monitors showing the outside of the compound, Clint saw Phil wading into hand-to-hand combat with a trio of HYDRA goons. His heart stopped when he saw Phil go down. Then the monitor automatically switched to the next quadrant, so he couldn’t see anything more.

“Come on, we’ve got to get out of here,” said the Red Team leader, who was limping on a wounded thigh.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed. He had to get topside as fast as possible and get to Phil. “I’ll take point. You guys try to keep up.” And with that he cut a swath to the nearest door.

By the time they made it topside, however, the fight had ended and the operation was in mop-up. Clint tried to think of who, besides Hill, he could ask about Phil. Fuck it. He'd done his job and Phil was his handler, even if he wasn't directly for this op.

"Hawkeye to Hill," he said, and held his breath. It took long, agonizing seconds for Hill to respond.

"Go ahead Blue Team Leader," she said, and he could hear the reproach in her voice, reminding him that he had sort of abandoned his post.

"Red Team has two injured members. Request medical assistance."

"Acknowledged."

"And, um… ma'am? What's Agent Coulson's condition?"

"Transported to medical. I don't have any more details." Clint wanted to be reassured, but wasn't. On an op like this, all injuries and fatalities were transported to medical, unless they were literally in pieces. *"In his absence, I need you to help oversee the clean-up, Agent Barton."*

Clint wanted to argue. To head for the nearest Quinjet and shove his way on board and get to Medical as fast as he could to see Phil. But he did neither. They still had injured agents on the ground. He still had work to do. And if Phil was hurt, or… (No, not dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be.) Phil would want him to do his job. To make sure that no one got left behind.

"Roger that, ma'am," he said, and got to work.

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When the door buzzer sounded, Phil heaved himself stiffly off the sofa, shuffled over to the intercom on the wall and simply punched the front door release button. Woe betide anyone who wasn't the take-out delivery guy showing up at his door, because he might be a mass of bruises and pulled muscles, but he had had a very bad day, and he could still take out half a platoon with a paperclip if he needed to. He picked up his wallet from the hall table, did some math in his head, and took out two twenties. It made the tip a little high, but they were almost ten minutes faster than he'd expected, so…

But when he heard footsteps in the hall and opened the door, instead of a delivery kid with a sack of take-out, Clint Barton was standing in his doorway.

"They said… At medical, they said they sent you home. They wouldn't tell me…" Clint shook his head as if he was frustrated with himself. "You're okay."

"I'm fine, Clint. Come in."

Phil dropped the bills on the table and took a couple of steps back to let Clint in.
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“You sure you’re okay? You’re not moving too good.” Clint’s sharp eyes were looking him up and down.

“I’m fine, Clint. Just some bruises and strained muscles. Apparently taking on four guys at once was a mistake. Should have stuck to three.” He was trying to dispel the tension in the room. Clint was wound up tight, still staring at him.

“I saw you go down. I was in the comms room with Red Team and the monitors were showing the perimeter and I saw you fight and go down. I… Fuck, Phil. I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil said, even though it was ridiculous to apologize. “I’m fine. Really. One of your baby snipers had the bad guys in his sights, and as soon as I went down he was able to pick them off. Not until after they got in a few kicks, mind you, but it’s nothing serious. Medical wouldn’t have sent me home otherwise, you know that.” Phil was speaking softly, reassuringly. He knew how he had felt the last time Clint was seriously injured, and he knew Clint cared about him.

“Yeah.” Clint blew out his breath and some of the tension left with it. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’ve ordered some food, there’ll be enough for two. Sit down, eat with me.”

“I… Thanks, Phil. I’d love to, I really would. But I, uh… I’m not actually supposed to be here… this is… I, uh, kinda told Hill that I was going to shower and change and then be available to help debrief the baby snipers.” Clint had a sheepish grin on his face as he headed for the door.

“Well you’d better get back, then. Maria Hill does not like to be kept waiting.”

“Yeah, I know. Any more than you do.” But Clint had paused in the doorway and turned around to face him again.

“What is it, Clint?” Phil asked quietly.

“Nothing, it’s…” Clint shoved his hands into his pockets. “It’s nothing.”

“Clint…”

“It’s just that sometimes… Sometimes it kinda sucks that I can’t give my best friend a hug to show him I’m glad he’s alive. That’s all. Sorry.” The ‘sorry’ was mumbled at the floor and Clint was turning around again and reaching for the door handle.

“Clint.” Phil put his hand on Clint’s arm to stop him and closed his fingers around warm skin and solid muscle. Clint stopped moving. “I can do hugs.”

“Don’t. Not just for me, I mean. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.” Clint hadn’t turned around and he was talking to the floor again.

“Clint, look at me. Please.” Clint turned, slowly. “If I tell you something’s okay, then it’s okay. You need to trust me that I know my own limits.” Phil’s heart was pounding fast as he

said the next part. “And a hug sounds great.” He tried to keep his tone light.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Just don’t put your hands anywhere except on my back or shoulders, and it’ll be fine. Now come here.” Phil tugged a little and pulled Clint into an embrace. After a moment, he felt Clint’s arms wrap around him and Clint’s hands came to rest lightly on his back. For his part, Phil couldn’t help but cling to Clint, trying to drink in the moment, to memorize every single instant.

“Anything you want, Phil. Anything I can give you. Take it, it’s yours,” Clint whispered, his voice choked with emotion.

Phil knew he shouldn’t. Knew it was a bad idea, but he couldn’t stop himself. He couldn’t not take this one opportunity to have… to feel… He slid one hand up to the back of Clint’s neck, cupping it, and laid his cheek against Clint’s. “Is this okay?” Phil asked.

“It’s fine. It’s good,” Clint said, holding on a little more tightly.

Phil gave himself the space of three long breaths to soak in as much as he could, then he forced himself to move. To let go. To step back. “Thank you,” he said around the lump in his throat.

“You’re welcome. I… I should go.”

“Yes.” Phil cleared his throat to get his voice working properly again. “I’m off for a couple of days, but I should be back on Thursday. I’ll see you then.”

“Thursday. Right. See you then.” Clint sketched a wave, then squared his shoulders and left, just as the delivery kid was arriving with the food. Phil handed over the bills and set the sack on his coffee table. Then poured himself a scotch. What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

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Clint had called an hour ago, to ask if he could drop by, so this time Phil was expecting him.

"If things were different, would we be together?” No ‘Hello, how are you?’ No inquiry into the state of his health, just the question that Phil had figured was coming for a while now.

“You mean if I wasn’t impotent because I was tortured and raped?” Phil shot back, but if he’d been hoping to rattle Clint, it didn’t work. Clint didn’t even blink, just looked straight back at him defiantly.

“Yes. If that hadn’t happened, but everything else, everything between us was the same. The way you feel about me. The way I feel about you. Would we be together?”

Phil should have said something about his feelings being purely platonic. He should have deflected or flat out refused to answer, but instead he found himself saying. “Maybe, Probably. I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter.”
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“It does matter, Phil. It matters a lot. I love you, you know that right? And I know you feel the same about me. So let’s be together.” It sounded so simple when Clint said it, but it wasn’t simple at all.

“Clint, we can’t. I can’t.”

“You can’t what? Get it up? I know that, that’s what impotent means. But last night when you hugged me, the way you touched me… it felt as if you’d been wanting to for a long time. I want you to touch me, Phil. I want to give you everything I can. And I’ll take whatever you’re comfortable with and no more. If that means all we do is sit next to each other on the sofa and hold hands, I’m fine with that.”

“You won’t be fine with that. You can’t be fine with that. You’re young, you’re attractive, you–”

“I haven’t had sex in six months, because the last couple of times I went out on a date, I sat across the table from the guy I was with wishing that I was spending the evening here watching TV with you instead. It’s kinda hard to date when you’re in love with someone else. I don’t care about the sex. My right hand’s good enough. I just want to come over here and cook for you, and spend time with you, and make you as happy as I possibly can, however I can.” Clint delivered this speech staring at Phil, defying him to say ‘no’.

“Clint.” Phil felt like he’d been punched in the gut. How could he explain without going into details that… well, for one thing were above Clint’s clearance level, not that that was what was really holding Phil back.

“Please, Phil,” Clint said, his tone softer now, imploring. “Can’t we just try?”

Phil couldn’t help his bitter laugh. “Last time I tried, the guy I was with touched me somewhere he shouldn’t have, and I threw him across the room and broke his collarbone.”

“I know how to fall without breaking anything. I’ve had lots of practice.”

“Clint, I’m serious.”

“So am I. If what’s holding you back is that you’re afraid of hurting me,” Clint said. Phil shook his head. They both knew that they were evenly matched, physically, and that Clint was exceptionally well trained. “Then just think about it? Please? Don’t say ‘no’ right now.”

“Clint,” Phil could hear the slightly desperate edge in his own voice now. Because he wanted what Clint was offering. He wanted it more than he’d ever wanted anything in his whole life. But it wouldn’t work. It couldn’t...

“I love you and I want to be with you,” Clint said, looking into his eyes with an intensity that made Phil want to cry.

“I’ll think about it,” Phil said.

Clint’s smile was blindingly bright. “Take all the time you need,” he said. “I’ll wait.”

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“I’d like your permission to show Agent Barton the Honduras file.”

From across his desk, Nick Fury’s one eye regarded him impassively, but Phil had been friends with Nick for almost twenty years, and knew his tiny little tells. He didn’t blame Nick for being surprised.

“I assume you have a good reason for asking.”

“We’re, ah… we’re discussing attempting to start a, ah… romantic relationship.” Phil managed not to blush under Nick’s stare.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m very happy to hear that, Cheese. But do you really think showing him that file is a good idea?”

“Yes, I do. He deserves to know what happened, and what he’s getting into if we try. Besides, this way when it doesn’t work out, he won’t blame himself, and maybe we’ll still be able to stay friends.”

“Careful there Phil, your optimism is getting the better of you,” Nick said.

“How long do you think that a sexless relationship with someone he can’t even touch is going to last?”

“Well, it’ll last a hell of a lot longer if you don’t condemn it before it’s even started, that’s for damn sure. Besides, I was under the impression you’d made some progress on the physical side of things, back when you were still working on it.” Nick’s tone held rebuke that Phil knew came from a place of concern.

So he bit back the cutting remark he’d been about to make, and sank back in his chair, rubbing a hand across his face. “I just… I just don’t want to get my hopes up. I love him, and he loves me, and… And I know well enough not to believe that that’s somehow magically going to fix anything.”

“All relationships are hard work, Phil. No matter who you are and what your past looks like. And last I checked, neither of you were afraid of hard work. Permission granted, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Phil. You know that.”

Phil nodded, and stood. On an impulse he stuck his hand out and Nick stood and took it in both of his own. “Good luck, Cheese.”

“Thanks, we’ll need it.”

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“Thanks for coming,” Phil said when Clint knocked on his apartment door for the third time in a week.

“You said you wanted to talk. ‘Course I came,” Clint said, kicking off his boots and dropping his jacket on the back of the sofa.

Phil nodded. Of course. He hadn’t told Clint that he’d made a decision, hadn’t even told him that it was about their relationship. Just asked him to come, and here he was.

“I’m getting myself a beer, do you want one?” Phil asked as Clint settled himself on the sofa, his eyes on the thick folder sitting on the coffee table. It was marked SHIELD Classified, EYES ONLY, Level 7.

“Um, sure.”

Phil used the moment alone in the kitchen to take a deep breath. He still wasn’t completely sure this was the right thing to do, but he couldn’t think of any other way to go about it. He carried two bottles back into the living room, and found Clint exactly where he’d left him, sitting. Waiting.

Phil sat. He handed Clint one of the two beers, took a pull on his own, and put the bottle down next to the file.

“That,” Phil said, “is the file on what happened in Honduras. How I was captured, what happened to me during captivity, my treatment afterward. I have Fury’s permission to show it to you. I’d like you to read it, and then, after, if you still…” Phil cleared his throat. He had planned what to say, he just hadn’t expected it to be quite this difficult to get the actual words out. “If you still want to be in a relationship with me, then we’ll try.”

Clint was silent for a moment, and perfectly still in the way that Phil had recently come to recognize meant Clint was quashing an impulse to reach out and touch.

“Phil, knowing the details of what happened to you isn’t going to change the way I feel about you, or what I want. I don’t need to read that-”

“I need you to,” Phil said quietly. “I need you to know. Everything. And this is easier… I can’t tell you. I can’t go through describing it all, not to you, not now. I need you to read the file, Clint.”

“Okay.” Clint picked up the thick folder and put it in his lap. He took a swig of his beer and put the bottle down on the table, then opened the cover.

Phil knew the file by heart, so he sat back and watched, and waited.

Waited while Clint read though the mission specification and planning reports. While he flipped to the back of the file to pull out the personnel files for the other agents on the mission with Phil. Watched as Clint saw the small red 'Deceased' decal on the bottom of each one, except for Phil’s. Clint put the personnel files aside and took another sip of his beer, then went back to reading.

Phil waited and watched while Clint read through the transcripts of the radio communications. And then the initial reports of SHIELD having lost contact with Phil's team as they missed one check in, then a second, then the exfil. As a team was assembled to go in after them. Phil saw Clint's lips compress in a hard line as he read Jasper Sitwell's intelligence reports indicating that an 'undetermined number of agents' had been captured, and his recommendation for a full assault team to rescue them.

Phil saw Clint's eyebrows go up as he read that Nick Fury, then deputy director of SHIELD, had taken command of the rescue mission personally. Clint didn't need to flip to the back for the personnel files of the agents assigned to the rescue mission, he knew them all: Nick Fury, Jasper Sitwell, Maria Hill, and Sam Harris, who Clint knew as 'Tap,' SHIELD's range-master.

Phil saw Clint's face go tight as he read the reports of the rescue team going in, finding the half-eaten bodies of Phil's original team-mates dumped in the jungle outside the compound.

Phil took a slow, quiet, deep breath, then another sip of his beer. He waited.

Waited while Clint read Jasper Sitwell's description of bursting into the tin hut where Phil was being held. Of finding Phil hanging from his wrists, face beaten unrecognizable. Of the truck battery and wires. Of the wounds and the blood and the flies and the stench of infection.

"They're dead, right? Tell me every single last one of them is dead." Clint's voice was completely flat, betraying a rage Phil had never seen in him before.

"Yes. Nick made sure."

Clint nodded. Blew out his breath. Finished his beer.

Phil waited.

Clint turned the page, and started to read the medical reports. The clinical descriptions of his injuries listed in Doctor Sanchez's neat handwriting. They did nothing to prepare him for the photos.

Phil felt a stab of guilt. This wasn't fair to Clint. But Phil needed him to know. If they were going to try to go down this road together, Clint had to know how extensive the damage had been, so that he could begin to understand that, although now only scars remained, that the deeper wounds were still there.

Clint's hands didn't shake as he carefully picked up and looked at each photograph, the ones taken soon after Phil had been admitted to SHIELD medical, and the ones taken weeks later, once the bruising had faded, and everything was healing. But Clint's jaw was tightly clenched and his eyes had narrowed to slits.

This was why Phil had said, when he'd handed Clint the file, 'If you still want to be in a relationship with me.' Why he'd given Clint that out. Because it was one thing to know in the abstract that someone you cared about had been tortured and raped. It was another thing

entirely to look at a photograph of that person's scarred genitals and disfigured nipples, and still feel some kind of romantic attraction afterwards.

Clint put the last photograph down and raised a hand to his own face. Phil waited for him to close his eyes, and then close the folder. To say 'I'm sorry, Phil, I can't do this.'

But Clint just swiped at his eyes, his hand coming away wet. He wiped it on his jeans, and silently turned the page.

Phil got up and went to the kitchen. He got a bottle of water for Clint and a glass for himself. Back in the living room he put the water in front of Clint, then went to his liquor cabinet and retrieved the bottle of Scotch that Clint had got him the year before as a thank-you gift. It was still half-full.

He poured himself a healthy measure and corked the bottle, but left it out. He sat back down next to Clint.

"I haven't gotten to the worst part yet, have I?" Clint asked, turning to look at Phil with eyes that were wide now, and rimmed with red.

"No, that's next. If you need to take a break, or leave it for tonight…" Phil offered.

"No." Clint looked back down at the file in his hands, at the heading Phil knew was on the page in front of him: *Transcript of the report given by Agent Phillip J. Coulson of his captivity by Los Diablos*. "No, you lived through it. You live with it. The least I can do is read that damn report."

Phil sat, and watched, and waited as Clint read. Phil could recite it word-for-word. One of his therapists had believed in desensitization as a treatment for PTSD, and had recommended he re-read his own reports of the incident, as a way of lessening its hold over him. To what extent it had worked, Phil still wasn't sure, but along with other treatment he'd eventually been deemed fit for return to duty, and that was all he'd cared about.

So he still had nightmares, and the occasional panic attack, and couldn't really handle being touched, but he was functional. And that had been enough for him, until Clint. Clint who had pushed through all his defenses. Clint who had become one of his closest friends. Clint who he'd fallen in love with.

Clint whose fists were clenched tight as he read about the truck battery and the broom handle and the knife. Clint whose eyes were wet again as he read Phil's own words describing what had happened to him in blunt, dispassionate language.

When Clint got to the end of that report, he was trembling slightly. Phil handed him the glass of scotch, then got up and turned the temperature in the apartment up a few degrees.

They didn't speak. Clint finished the drink and handed the glass back. He sat, staring unseeing at the wall across from the sofa for a minute, then he took a deep breath, and turned the page. Only when he realized what he was looking at did he look back up at Phil.

“Phil, I can’t read this.” ’This’ was the final report on his psychological condition as assessed by a SHIELD therapist upon Phil’s return to active duty. "It’s… It’s private. Isn’t there some kind of law or something?”

Phil had to smile. “The therapist is a SHIELD employee who works for Director Fury, who gave permission for you to read the file. It’s part of my employee record, for anyone who has clearance to read that. And you.”

“But…”

“Clint, if you don’t want to, it’s okay.”

“No… I just… You really want me to read this?”

“I want you to understand that I’m fit for duty, yes. And I want you to know what my limitations are. I, ah… I’ve contacted my therapist. Not him,” Phil said, waving a hand at the report on Clint’s knee, “The therapist I was working with to, ah… try to regain the ability to,” Phil cleared his throat. As difficult as it was, he was going to have to get used to talking about this stuff again. Out loud, with Clint. “To function sexually. She’s willing to treat me again, if we decide to, ah… pursue this.”

“She?” Clint’s eyebrows went up.

“Finding a therapist that you’re compatible with isn’t easy. I started out with a male therapist who specialized in PTSD related to captivity and torture, but when it became apparent that my main, ah, issues were specifically related to having been raped, he recommended that I continue with someone who specialized in that area. Most of them are, unsurprisingly, women. But since I’m gay,” Phil shrugged. “Anyway, we were making progress, for a while anyway.”

“Until the broken collarbone incident.”

“Until then. And after that I decided to give it a rest for a bit. To concentrate on my job. I’d been promoted to handler, and there was a lot of work to do…” Phil saw the look Clint was giving him. “Yes. I gave up. I ran away. I stopped trying.” Phil looked Clint straight in the eyes. “I’m ready to try again, now. If you’re sure that’s what you want.”

“Phil, I–”

“Finish reading the file, first. Please.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Clint went back to his reading. It still wasn’t easy, Phil knew that. There were descriptions of his nightmares and his panic attacks, of his feelings about his own body. There were details of the goals he had set with his therapist, the first of which was “Be able to hold my own dick again to piss.”

By the time he got to the end of the file, Clint’s eyes were wet again, and Phil dug into his pocket and pulled out a white cotton handkerchief which he offered Clint.

Clint took it with a laugh, and dabbed his eyes.

“D’you remember the op in Mexico. Our first one together, with the nuclear torpedoes?”

“Of course. How could I forget?”

“That’s the first time I saw one of these handkerchiefs of yours. I had a scratch, from some shrapnel, or a bit of rock or something, and the medic was busy with McCoy. He was shot in the leg, remember?”

Phil nodded.

“And you came over and you took a goddam handkerchief out of your pocket and you stuck it on my shoulder where I was bleeding a little. That was when I realized that you thought I was worth something. ‘Cause you were standing there next to me, looking worried and getting your nice clean handkerchief all covered in my blood. Made me think maybe I was worth something.”

“You were. You are.”

Clint handed Phil his handkerchief back, then closed the file and put it on the table. “It’s not some kind of gratitude thing. How I feel about you. As soon as I stopped resenting you, stopped seeing you as my babysitter, just another suit, I fell for you hard. You’re fucking gorgeous, Phil. And smart and competent and honest and caring and… You’re the best man I’ve ever met in my entire life, and even though I still can’t believe that you actually love me, I want to be with you. In whatever way that’s possible for you. For us.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take some time? I’ll understand it you want to go home and think about… things.” Phil glanced at the file on the table.

“Hell, what I want to do right now is wrap you in my arms and never let go. And since I know that’s not an option, I want to stay here and talk to you, be with you. Reassure myself that despite all of that,” Clint gestured at the folder, “You’re okay. Or mostly okay, anyway. If… if that’s all right with you I mean. If you need me to leave-”

“No, stay,” Phil said, beginning to appreciate the full extent of the minefield they were walking into. He put his hand out, palm up, on the sofa cushion between them. “Take my hand,” he said.

Clint smiled and reached out, lacing his fingers through Phil’s and gripping firmly. “Is this our starting point?”

“No” Phil answered seriously, “it’s our fall-back position. If… when I’m under a lot of stress, if I’ve had a bad day, or a nightmare the night before, or… sometimes just because. This is all I’ll be able to give you. Maybe for days at a time. I need you to understand that.”

Clint nodded. “I do. And look, if you ever need me to not be here. I get that too. I care about you so much, Phil. I want this, but I don’t want to do anything that’s going to hurt you, ever. If you need to be alone, or whatever, you just tell me.”

Phil nodded gratefully. “That goes for you too. This isn’t going to be easy, on either of us. If you need a break, or just some time to yourself or whatever, you need to be able to tell me that.”

“Yeah. I will. Or at least I’ll try to, that’s all I can promise,” Clint said.

“I know.” Phil sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just… I want this, I absolutely do. I’m just worried about all the ways it could go wrong,” Phil said, and squeezed Clint’s hand in his.

“I love you and I want to be with you,” Clint said softly. “Everything else is negotiable. Everything.”

“Yes, okay. I love you and I want to be with you, too.” Phil’s chest felt tight, but in a good way for a change.

Clint turned a brilliant smile on him. “That’s the first time you’ve actually said it to me, you know?”

“Said what?”

“That you love me. I mean I knew, but… It’s nice to hear you actually say it.”

“You’ve said that a couple of times, that you knew. Was it that obvious?” Phil thought he had a better game face than that.

Clint laughed. “Oh god, no. No, it was the op in Belgrade. The last thing I remember before I blacked out was you begging me not to die, and telling me you loved me. That’s when, uh… that’s when it got hard to keep dating.”

“I’m sorry. If I’d realized you could hear me, I never would have–”

“I know. Hearing’s always the last thing to go when you’re passing out, though. Even mine. I’m glad you did, Phil. Even if we’d never gotten this far,” he squeezed Phil’s hand, “I still would have wanted to know. So, ah, any ideas on where we go from here?”

“Not really. I’ll call Dr. Waite tomorrow and set up regular appointments. Um, I still need to ask you not to touch me, for now, anyway. I’m sorry.” Phil looked down at his knees, feeling miserable.

“Hey, no, it’s fine. We do this on your terms. At your pace. I’m not gonna push, ever. That I can absolutely promise. And by the way, just to be clear about this up front, you can touch me any way you want to, anywhere, any time. I want to give you everything I can, Phil. Always.”

Phil sighed again. “That’s not going to be easy for me; taking without being able to reciprocate.”

“I know, but the offer’s there, and I’m gonna remind you of it regularly. Besides, it’s not like I haven’t wanted to feel your hands on me for ages. It’s not going to be one-sided, believe me.”

Phil tried not to dampen Clint’s optimism. “We’ll see.”

“Sure, ‘course. No pressure. It’s not like I expect a kiss goodnight or anything,” Clint said.

“Oh, I can do kissing, that’s not an issue.”

“You can? That’s fantastic!” Clint’s face lit up with a brilliant, happy smile.

“It’s the touching that goes with it that’s the problem and, well, the fact that I have to back off as soon as things start to, ah… heat up.”

“Phil, if I need to keep my hands behind my back so you can kiss me, that’s totally not a problem. And as for backing off, well, we’re both going to be doing a lot of that, I guess. But we’ll work it out. Even if it means I need to excuse myself to go jerk off in the bathroom, I’m okay with that, if you are. If it means I get to kiss you - or be kissed by you, or whatever. However this is going to work, I want it. I want you. Because I love you.”

The earnestness in Clint’s face was breaking Phil’s heart. And the idea of kissing him was making Phil ache to do just that. It had been so long since he’d held another man in his arms and kissed him, and now, suddenly he could have that with Clint. It was a little overwhelming. Phil squeezed Clint’s hand where he still held it. “I love you too,” he said, and saw Clint’s eyes shine brighter as he said it. “But even with the things I can do, we’re going to need to take it slow.”

“Slow’s fine. I’ve been waiting for years, Phil, without thinking there was even any chance. I can wait as long as you need me to.”

Phil didn’t believe that was true. He was sure that after a while Clint would get frustrated with the lack of sexual contact, but he was hoping that maybe, with his therapist’s help, he’d be able to move just fast enough for Clint not to give up on them.

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“So let’s review your goals for therapy.”

“You want me to say it out loud again, so that I get more comfortable with talking about this,” Phil said, looking Dr. Waite in the eye.

“That’s partly it, yes, but at the end of one of your briefings, don’t you cover the key points, just to make sure everyone’s on the same page?”

Phil sighed. He remembered that he liked Dr. Waite so much because she pushed him as far as he needed to be pushed, and didn’t let him get away with bullshitting her, ever. The problem was that before, when he’d being doing this kind of therapy, it had been more… academic. It would be nice to be able to get a hard-on without having a panic attack, because he just might want to date someone again sometime, and potentially have sex with them.
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Seven years ago that had all seemed so far in the future, and the little (sometimes silly, often highly embarrassing) steps that he needed to get there were exercises that he gave as much of his time and attention to as he could afford.

But now it was different. Now there was Clint, who wanted to touch him. Clint, who he wanted to kiss. Clint, who deserved every single ounce of effort that he could put into this.

“My goals for therapy are to have a mutually-satisfying romantic and sexual relationship with my partner, Clint Barton. Specifically I would like him to be able to touch me sexually and I would like to be able to maintain an erection and be brought to orgasm without having a panic attack or other anxiety symptoms related to my PTSD.”

“Good. And the steps we’ve agreed that you’re going to work on this week?”

Phil blew out his breath. “I’m going to look at myself naked in the mirror every day to increase my own comfort with my body, and I’m going to attempt to masturbate by touching my cock, stopping when the anxiety starts to overwhelm the pleasurable sensations.”

“And?”

“And I’m going to kiss Clint. And touch him sensually, at least, if not sexually, with the goal of giving him pleasure.”

“Pleasure and?”

“Comfort. Companionship. Reassurance that I want him, that I’m trying, that I appreciate what he has offered.”

“And what has he offered?”

“Everything. Anything. He…” Phil had to squeeze his eyes shut for a minute and swallow before continuing. “He has told me that I can have whatever I want, to take whatever I need. I… I need to respect and honor that, even though I can’t reciprocate.”

“I know it’s hard, Phil,” Dr. Waite said gently, “but you understand why, right?”

“Yes. I need to remember that me touching him feels good for both of us. That I’m not taking anything away from him. That he wants me to touch him as much as I want him to be able to touch me.”

“Do you believe that, Phil? Really believe it?”

“I’m working on it. His smile helps a lot.”

“Good. Is there anything else you want to address this week?”

“No, I think we’ve covered all the big ticket items.” Phil knew it was a weak joke, but he was trying his best.

“Good. I’ll see you next week, then.”

“Yes. If anything comes up and I have to cancel, I’ll call your office.”

“Of course. And Phil? I know it’s hard, but try to remember that it’s a romantic relationship, not a mission. It’s suppose to be fun.”

Phil managed a grin. “I’ll try.”

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They were standing in the kitchen. Clint was cooking, and Phil was keeping him company, happy and relaxed and feeling optimistic for the first time in a long, long time.

“Can that,” he asked, waving his hand at the pots bubbling gently on the stove, “wait for a couple of minutes?”

“Sure. Even longer if I turn the heat down. What’s up?”

“I’d like to kiss you.”

Clint snapped the dials for both burners down to ‘minimum’ so fast that Phil barely saw his hands move. Then Clint put his hands behind his back. “Sounds awesome,” he said with a grin.

“You, ah, you don’t actually have to-” Phil gestured at Clint’s arms. “You can touch my back, like the time we hugged.”

“Okay,” Clint said, letting his arms hang loosely by his sides.

“Okay,” said Phil with a smile, and stepped in close. “Go ahead,” he said, and Clint brought his arms up and held him loosely, his long fingers splayed out on the back of Phil’s shirt.

Phil put one hand on Clint’s bicep, his fingers tucked up under the sleeve of Clint’s t-shirt. He raised the other hand to Clint’s cheek. “Is this okay?”

“It’s great Phil. It feels amazing. Anything you want, Phil. Always.”

Phil nodded a little, the reminder was comforting because it reinforced how much Clint wanted this. How much he was getting back when Phil touched him. He leaned in and their lips met.

In the past couple of weeks, Phil had allowed himself to start fantasizing about kissing Clint. About what it would feel like to touch him and hold him. About what this moment would feel like, finally giving in to the ache that he’d been feeling for years. In his fantasies everything started slow and soft, then built in intensity, until had his tongue thrust deep in Clint’s hot wet mouth and he felt the familiar stirrings in his groin, and backed off, apologizing. Even when he was trying to fantasize a perfect first kiss, his brain wouldn’t let him ignore the reality of his trauma, and the limitations it caused.

But that wasn’t what happened. He kissed Clint softly, and Clint kissed him back, just as softly, just as slowly; a gentle, easy press of lips, and then he backed off, smiling. Phil
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couldn’t help but smile back, and lean in again. But he kissed just as softly, as that seemed to be what Clint wanted. He felt Clint’s thumbs rubbing in slow sweeping arcs on his back, and he responded by sweeping his own thumb along Clint’s jaw. Clint had shaved extra closely before coming over, his skin was smooth and he smelled faintly of soap.

Phil let his eyes drift closed, still kissing, softly, closed-mouthed, just a soft press of his lips against Clint’s. Clint smelled great. Felt wonderful in his arms. This… seemed too good to be true. That they could do this, just this and no more, and that it could feel so good. So right.

Phil pulled back, finally, and opened his eyes to find Clint’s bright ones staring at him.

“That was amazing,” Clint said with a brilliant, beautiful smile.

“Yes. It was. And you are. Amazing. I… keep wanting to say it, but I haven’t because, well, because I think I know what…” Phil stopped, realizing that he was ruining the moment by digging a hole. “Thank you. For taking the chance. For asking me to take it with you. For believing in us so much that you made me believe it too.”

“You’re welcome, Phil. Are we gonna kiss some more, or do you want to eat, first?”

“Let’s eat, then maybe more kissing after supper.”

“Sounds great.”

Chapter 6: The Sixth Year

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

The Sixth Year

“I need Strike Team Delta in the air ten minutes ago. Make it happen.” Fury said to Hill, an angry scowl on his face.

Maria Hill punched an emergency override code into her phone.

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Clint scrambled up from where he’d been lying on the sofa with Phil curled up behind him, one arm draped across Clint’s stomach, head propped up on a couple of cushions.

“That’s the emergency beep, isn’t it?” Clint said as he tossed Phil’s phone to him and answered his own. Phil nodded. He was kicking Clint off the couch and standing up, grabbing his jacket and tie from where they were hung over a chair.

Clint took the hint and shoved his feet into his boots. They were on their way out of Phil’s apartment by the time Hill had finished saying “We need both of you here now. There’s a car outside your building.”

Clint knew things were bad when Fury himself met them in the garage.

“Agent Romanoff is already in a Quinjet on the roof. You’re to fly to O’Hare where a hijacked passenger jet is currently being re-fueled. You have twenty minutes to get there, figure out a way to defeat the hijackers, and get the 207 remaining passengers to safety.”

“I thought we didn’t refuel hijacked planes,” Clint said.

“How many passengers have they killed?” Phil asked, and Clint put two and two together.

“Three passengers, the pilot and the co-pilot. The plane was coming from Geneva. The crown prince of Bahrain is on that plane, as well as one US senator, two Russian Olympic gold medalists, and the Prime Minister of Sweden’s daughter. I talked the World Security Council into giving us jurisdiction, and I imagine the FBI team on the ground isn’t going to be happy about that, but we don’t have time to argue with them.”

The elevator had reached the roof and Clint and Phil sprinted towards the waiting Quinjet, Fury pacing next to them. “Get those people off that plane.”

“Yes, sir,” Phil said, then “Go,” to the Quinjet pilot. Clint grabbed a strut with one hand and Phil’s elbow with the other as the jet lurched in a crosswind. Clint saw Natasha’s eyebrows go up at that, and he flashed her a tiny smile.

Clint and Phil got themselves strapped in.
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“We need a plan. Now,” Phil said.

“If talking was going to help, the FBI could handle it, they have some top notch negotiators. We need to get on the plane, and take out the hijackers.” Natasha was to the point, as usual.

Clint was nodding. “Okay, how do we do that? I’m assuming we can’t sneak on as maintenance crew or something like that.”

“No, no one’s getting on or off, and they have their men down on the tarmac watching the re-fueling.

“Why don’t they just shoot the bad guys on the tarmac, even up the odds a little?”

“Presumably because the hijackers inside the plane have threatened to shoot more hostages.” Phil was dialing up SHIELD’s high-res satellite feed on his tablet.

“Right. So how do we get on the plane?”

“Undercarriage,” said Nat. “We climb up into the undercarriage and get access to the hold, and the rest of the plane from there.

Phil was nodding and talking into his comm link. *“We need full schematics of the aircraft, plus recommendations from an aeronautics engineer on how to get from the landing gear to the cabin without cutting through something vital.”*

“The problem is,” Clint said, pointing at Phil's tablet which showed an image of the plane on the runway, with three bad guys walking a perimeter. “We don’t know how many more they have on board, watching from the windows. Even if we wait until refueling’s finished, and those three get back on, if they see us sneaking towards the wheels…”

Nat nodded. “You have a good point, but I don’t see what other options we have.”

“I have an idea, but you’re going to hate it,” Clint said, looking directly at Phil.

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Phil did hate it, but he had to admit that Clint was right; it was their best chance of getting onto the plane without being seen. By the time the Quinjet touched down on a patch of grass between two runways, Clint and Nat were suited up and ready to go, carrying as much gear as they could manage. Getting into the passenger cabin was going to be the hard part. Once they were there, Phil had complete confidence in their ability to take out the hijackers while keeping the passengers safe. They were, after all, SHIELD’s two best master assassins.

The first complication came when Phil said to the FBI agent in charge on the ground, “I need a fast vehicle and your best driver,” and the guy demanded to know SHIELD’s plan first.

“I don’t have time to explain it, and even if I did, I wouldn’t, because it’s above your clearance level,” Phil said in his best Agent Coulson voice.
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As the guy started to argue again, they could hear the plane's engines coming up to speed. Phil walked away from the FBI guy and over to the nearest SUV.

"What's this thing's top speed?" he asked the driver, who was leaning up against the door.

"120 miles-per-hour on the straightaway. It's got a 6-cylinder, 4-liter engine, but it takes a while to get up there; it hasn't got a whole lot of pick-up."

"It'll have to do. Give me the keys," Phil said.

"Now just a minute," said the FBI agent who had followed Phil over to the vehicle, and grabbed Phil by the arm. Phil stamped hard on his instep, pulled his arm out of the now weakened grip, and snapped his elbow back into the man's face.

"Keys?"

"In the ignition."

"Thanks." The plane was already starting to taxi down the runway. Phil jumped into the driver's side and Clint and Nat both climbed into the passenger side.

"Find the controls for the sunroof."

The plane swept past them and Phil pulled out behind it, stepping hard on the gas pedal and muttering "Come on, come on," as the car gained speed far too slowly for his liking. The sunroof whirred open and Clint stood up on the passenger seat. Nat handed him his bow.

His comms clicked, and he heard Phil's voice say softly, *"Be careful. I love you."*

"Love you too," Clint said into the 100mph wind, not knowing if Phil could hear him. *"Don't worry, I'm coming back."*

He aimed and fired a grappling arrow at the wheel strut of the plane, nodding with satisfaction as it gripped firmly. "Okay, close as you can now, Phil," he shouted down through the sunroof.

The car edged closer, but the plane was picking up speed quickly. There was no time left. Nat tied the rope off and Clint climbed out onto the SUV's hood. He grabbed the rope, swung his legs up to wrap his ankles over it, and climbed towards the plane as fast as he could.

The minute his hand touched the strut he felt the rope dip and strain and glanced down to see Nat following him. He swung up onto the strut and pulled his knife out of it's sheath, ready to cut the rope the minute Nat was on board. The textured wooden grip felt comfortable and familiar in his hand and he smiled, thinking about the first of these knives Phil had given him, years ago. He'd have to think of something especially nice for Phil's birthday this year, now that they were officially a couple.

The plane's engines screamed, and the rope strained. Clint leaned out as far as he could and grabbed Nat's wrist. She let go of the rope and swung towards him, wrapping her legs around his waist. He cut the rope, and saw the car skid as Phil compensated for the sudden change in

stress. Nat was already moving, climbing over him and up into the wheel-well. Clint glanced back at the car one last time. Phil had one hand on the wheel and the other raised in the sign language figure for ‘I love you.’ Clint flashed the sign back before following Nat up into the plane.

After that it was simply a matter of following the plane’s schematics into the baggage compartment and from there to an access panel in the rear galley which Nat carefully lifted a corner of, then whispered to Clint, “You’d better take a look, you might spot something.”

Clint looked long at everything he could see through the sliver. “It’s hard to tell just from looking at shoes, but I think we’re clear.”

Nat crawled out first, and Clint grinned at the startled stewardess whose eyes went wide when Nat smiled at her and put a finger to her lips. Clint pointed at the SHIELD patch on the shoulder of her uniform. The stewardess might not recognize it, but Clint figured that it probably looked official enough to be reassuring. Terrorists didn’t usually go in for uniforms with embroidered logos, in Clint’s pretty extensive experience with terrorists.

Crouching in the galley, they spotted two bad guys in the coach section of the plane, one in each aisle.

“You go left, I’ll take right,” Nat said, and Clint nodded. Like the well-oiled team they were, they took out the bad guys quickly and silently, then moved into the Business Class cabin and dispatched the guards there. They were in the cockpit, tying up the remaining terrorists before the first passenger started yelling and asking what was going on.

Clint strapped himself into the pilot’s seat while Nat faced off against the State Senator who demanded to know what was happening, which agency they were with, and (when Nat was not forthcoming with that information) the name of their superior. Natasha sounded like she was about to deck the guy when a tall man shoved past him, to his indignant squawk.

“SHIELD?” Clint heard the newcomer ask.

“Yes.”

“He can land this thing?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Air Marshall Donald Franklin. I’ll deal with this bozo and anyone else who’s causing trouble. You help your partner land the plane.” Clint liked the sound of him.

Nat strapped herself in next to Clint. “You do know how to land this thing, right?”

“Well, it’s a little different than the Quinjet, but the principals are the same.”

“The principals are the same, Clint–“

“Don’t worry, Nat, I’m already on the comms with Boeing’s chief flight instructor. He’s gonna talk me through the landing. You should jack in your headphones and mic, he wants

you to find the landing checklist and go through it with me."

"Checklist. Right."

In the end it wasn't a perfect landing, more of a belly-flop, in fact, but a safe one. One that everyone walked away from. SHIELD didn't take public bows, as a rule, so Clint and Nat stayed in the cockpit, waiting for instructions. Instead, Phil himself showed up, looking badass in his shades, despite what the wind on the runway had done to his hair. "Well done, both of you," he said.

"Thanks boss," Clint said. "So what's the cover story going to be?"

"I'm not sure. Fury and Hill are still working that out with the FBI and the Air Marshal's office. You'll probably end up being off-duty NSA agents or something."

"The NSA doesn't have our moves," Clint said, grinning wide with the adrenalin still running through his veins.

"No one has our moves," Nat said, but she was smiling a little too.

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Clint and Phil were sitting in Dr. Waite's office, side by side on the couch with a few inches of space between them. It was the second time Clint had joined Phil for his session, at the therapist's request. Phil had been worried about asking him, knowing he'd had bad experiences with the mental health profession in the past, but Clint's answer had been, "Anything you need from me, Phil. Always."

"So," said Dr. Waite, "did you get a chance to try the exercise I recommended last time we met?"

Clint waited for Phil to answer.

"We tried."

"And how did it go?"

Clint worked on not blushing. This talking about sex with Phil to a lady doctor was getting easier, but it was still kind of weird. She was good at her job, though, completely matter-of-fact, and nothing seemed to phase her. But when she'd suggested that they watch each other masturbate, Clint had squirmed uncomfortably.

When Phil didn't say anything, Clint broke the silence. "Uh, not too well. Nothing bad happened, or anything, it just didn't… neither of us, uh…" Clint could feel his face heating up.

"It was awkward and uncomfortable, rather than sexy. Neither of us were able to orgasm, so we gave up."
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“I see. Well, in that case maybe you should continue to concentrate on the sensual touching, for now. How is that going?”

“Good,” said Phil, and Clint nodded.

“Tell me what’s good about it.”

Phil took a breath and let it out, and Clint knew he was dealing with the stress of having to talk about how he was still affected by his trauma. “Well, I really like just being able to touch. Having my hand on Clint’s arm when we’re sitting together or cuddled up on the sofa. After not having anything like that for so long, it’s… liberating.”

“That’s good to hear. What about you, Clint? how are you dealing with not being able to touch Phil as much as he touches you?”

“It’s not a problem. No, really,” he said, keeping his eyes on Dr. Waite as Phil turned an incredulous look on him. “The fact that I can touch him at all, even just holding his hand while we’re watching TV is great. What matters to me is knowing that he loves me, and that we’re trying to make this work.”

“Except?”

“There’s no except. Not about me touching him.”

“And what about him touching you?” Clint broke eye contact then, and looked down at his lap. Damn this doctor knew her stuff.

“Clint?” Phil’s voice was worried.

“It’s not. There’s nothing wrong. I just. Sometimes I… I want you to touch me more, and in more places than you do.” The words came out in a rush. “It’s like, because I can only touch your arms and your face, that you only touch me there too, and if it’s… if that’s because it stresses you to touch me somewhere else, that’s fine, I get it.”

“It’s not. I mean it doesn’t stress me,” Phil said quietly.

“Then why are you limiting where you touch Clint?” Dr. Waite asked.

It was Phil’s turn to look down into his lap, and Clint could see him tense up. Clint put his hand out, palm up, on the sofa cushion between them. “I love you and I want to be with you.” He waited, desperately hoping that Phil would take his hand. Waited while Phil took another deep, calming breath, then reached out and threaded his fingers through Clint’s.

“I love you, and I want to be with you,” he said. Then after another breath. “It’s not fair. I know that’s stupid, but in my head it’s not fair for me to touch you somewhere that you can’t touch me.”

Phil looked tense and worried, so Clint smiled at him. “Of course. That makes perfect sense. I mean it doesn’t, at all, but in your head it would,” Clint said. Phil now looked exasperated, but at least he was less tense.

“Clint, could you tell Phil how, and where, and why you want him to touch you? Describe a scenario that you’d enjoy, maybe one that you’ve fantasized about?”

Still holding Phil’s hand, Clint turned to face him.

“We’re lying snuggled together on your couch, with you behind me, like usual, except I have my shirt off. You’ve got your arm wrapped around me, like you usually do, but your fingers are stroking my chest. You kiss the back of my bare shoulder and your lips feel so warm.”

“That sounds really nice. I…” Phil cleared his throat. “That’s definitely something we can try.”

“Good,” said the doctor, “You’ve planned your own exercise for next week, then.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil said.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Clint answered quickly.

“Clint, let Phil express his feelings. Don’t negate them, remember?” said Dr. Waite.

“Yeah, sorry. I just… I don’t want him to feel responsible for stuff that he can’t do.”

“Is that why you’re saying ’sorry,’ Phil? Because you feel responsible?”

“No,” Phil shook his head. “No, I just wish I could give you more, that’s all.”

“You’re giving me everything I want, Phil, I swear.”

“I know, I just…” Phil made a frustrated noise.

“Maybe you need to work out a code phrase for that, too,” Dr. Waite said.

“What do you mean?” Phil asked.

“Like that one,” she said, gesturing at where they were still holding hands on the sofa. “It’s an excellent coping mechanism for when you’re feeling stressed, and obviously works very well for both of you. So maybe you could come up with something similar that Phil could use to signal what he’s feeling.”

“It’s worth a try,” Phil said.

“Good. That’s our time for today, so Phil, I’ll see you again in two weeks, your work schedule permitting, as always, and I’d like to see you both again next month, if that’s still okay?” She looked from one to the other, and Clint gave Phil’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Fine with me.”

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As it turned out, they had two short missions one after the other, so it was over a week before they had another evening together. As they cuddled up on the sofa in their usual position,
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Clint made no mention of the ‘exercise’ that Dr. Waite had proposed, being thoroughly content to simply be lying in Phil’s arms and relaxing. Phil, however, seemed to have other ideas, because after ten minutes of sedate cuddling, he slipped his hand under the hem of Clint’s t-shirt.

“Is this okay?” he whispered, his lips brushing Clint’s ear.

“It’s great.”

“Good.” Phil’s hand drifted up across his abs and to his chest where his palm flattened out over Clint’s heart. Phil kissed the side of his neck, and Clint sighed contentedly. It was perfect.

They stayed that way until the end of the episode of Dog Cops, at which point Clint asked “Do you want to watch something else?”

“Nah, let’s just stay here like this for a bit.”

“Fine with me. I love you Phil.”

“Love you too,” Phil said, and brushed Clint’s neck with his lips again. “Um, so, how would you feel about taking your shirt off.”

“I’d like that a lot, but only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, then, just gimme a sec.” Clint twisted and half sat up, trying not to be out of physical contact with Phil for more than a couple of seconds. He dropped his t-shirt on the floor and snuggled back down gingerly. “How’s that?”

“It’s good,” Phil said, kissing the back of his shoulder and brushing his hand up Clint’s skin from his stomach to his collarbone and back down again. “It’s really good.”

“Yeah, it is.” Clint closed his eyes so that he could concentrate on how good it felt, Phil warm at his back, soft lips on his shoulder, and the strong sure fingers of Phil’s right hand caressing his skin. Phil’s fingers drifted back and forth across his chest, and Clint couldn’t help the small noise he made when one of them brushed his nipple.

“Was that a good noise?” Phil asked, his voice low and rough.

“Yeah, oh yeah.”

Clint could feel Phil humming into the skin of his neck and the fingertips brushed his nipple again, more surely this time, teasing and stroking, sending jolts of pleasure through him.

“Phil, that’s so good. That feels so damn good.”

“Good,” Phil murmured behind him, and kissed his neck again, this time latching on with open lips and wet tongue and driving Clint wild. Clint dragged in a long deep breath,

determined to keep himself under control, determined to enjoy this for as long as possible before…

“Phil, it feels amazing, but if you keep that up much longer, I’m gonna have to go lock myself in the bathroom for a couple of minutes,” Clint finally said when it felt like his hard cock was trying to burst through the zipper of his jeans.

Phil's’ lips left his neck, but his fingers still teased Clint’s nipple.

“"You don't have to.”

"Don't' have to what?"

"Lock yourself in the bathroom. You could, ah, do it here," Phil said, in a low whisper, his lips brushing Clint’s ear.

"You sure?"

“Yes. I’d like to try, anyway.”

Clint stopped himself from asking again. Dr. Waite had explained that it sounded like he was doubting that Phil knew what he wanted. So instead he just said, “Okay. I’m, uh, gonna unzip.”

“Umm-hmm. Go ahead.” And Phil was teasing the side of his neck with little laps of his tongue and brushing the edge of his thumb back and forth across Clint’s nipple in a maddeningly slow rhythm. Clint unzipped and shoved his underwear down, freeing his hard cock. He took himself in hand and groaned.

“Does that feel good?”

“God, yeah. So good, Phil. So damn good. You’re… the way you’re touching me turned me on so much, made me so hard.” Clint could feel Phil shift a little behind him.

“Can we shift positions, just a little?” Phil asked, and Clint wondered if Phil was hard too, and needed space, or…

“Of course, whatever you want.”

“I just want to get this arm under…” Clint got the hint and hitched himself up so that Phil could snake his left arm under. Now both of Phil’s arms were wrapped around him, and both of his hands were…

“Oh, god.”

“Now let me see you stroke yourself,” Phil said. He hooked his chin over Clint’s shoulder, his cheek pressed close to Clint’s.

“Yeah. Whatever you want, Phil. Like that? You like that?” he asked as he stroked his cock with long firm strokes.

“It’s gorgeous. Every part of you is gorgeous, Clint. I love looking at you. I always have.”

“You don’t have to just look. I mean, just… if you want. You can touch. Anywhere. Anything you want Phil.”

Phil was quiet for a long minute, still teasing both Clint’s nipples, watching as Clint slowly stroked himself. Then his right hand slid slowly down Clint’s chest, across his abs, and rested for a minute flat on his abdomen, as if he was gathering his courage. Clint didn’t say anything, not wanting to disrupt the moment, wanting Phil to feel free to do whatever he wanted, and no more.

“Stop a minute?” Phil asked, his voice hoarse.

“Sure.” Clint kept his hand still at the base of his cock, squeezing a little to help keep himself under control as Phil laid two fingers delicately on the top of his shaft and swept his thumb across the head, smearing fluid.

“God,” Clint gasped.

Phil was silent, fingers of his left hand still swiping back and forth across Clint’s nipple, and now exploring the head of his cock with gentle touches.

“Can I make you come?” It took Clint a moment to work out that Phil was asking permission, not whether it was possible.

“Yeah. Please. Fuck, Phil.”

The touches were still delicate, but purposeful, now, tracing the ridge of the crown and then sliding down the underside until they met Clint’s hand, and oh, god, that was fucking hot, too; having Phil’s hand on top of his around his cock.

“So good, Phil, so good. I’m so close.” It was torture, holding his hand still when every instinct was screaming to stroke himself hard and fast, but Clint didn’t move.

“I’ve fantasized about this so many times,” Phil murmured in his ear. “Over the last few months, when I’m in bed and doing my ‘exercises’” Clint felt Phil’s lips curve into an ironic smile against his cheek. “I can’t think about you touching me, yet, so instead I think about touching you, just like this.” Phil’s fingertips slid lightly down his shaft until they touched Clint's hand, still clasped around the base of his cock. Clint had no idea why it felt so erotic, and intimate, for Phil to be touching his hand on his own cock, as well as touching his cock, he just knew that it made him shiver and moan. Phil’s fingers travelled back up to the head and scratched at it very lightly with blunt fingernails, then Phil took him in a loose grip, his hand just skimming the sensitive skin of his shaft. Clint could feel the roughened bumps of Phil's calluses scraping across the flare of his cock-head and it was almost enough… he was almost there.

“This is how I touch myself,” Phil whispered, and that was all it took, Clint was coming, hard. Shooting onto his belly and Phil’s sofa cushions.

“Fuck. Phil. Oh god.” The arm across his chest held him tight as he gasped his way through one of the most spectacular orgasms of his life. Phil was kissing his neck again, in the same spot that now felt over-sensitized as well. Phil’s hand was still curled lightly around him and he wanted to move his one hand, to lace his fingers through Phil’s and wrap both their hands around his sticky, spent cock, but he didn’t want to risk making Phil feel trapped, so he didn’t move. Instead he just lay there gasping for breath as Phil continued to kiss and lick and suck lightly at his neck… and rock into him a little.

Clint had no idea how long Phil had been moving behind him, rocking gently, but now he could feel the firm ridge of Phil’s dick against his ass. Phil’s movements grew a little stronger, more purposeful, and he lifted his head to murmur in Clint’s ear, “Is this okay?”

“It’s fine, Phil, whatever you need, always.”

“I love you,” Phil whispered.

“If there’s anything I can do…” Clint knew there probably wasn’t, but he had to offer.

“Talk to me,” Phil said.

“Like, uh, sexy talk?”

“Anything.” Phil’s voice was a little strained now, and the arm across his chest was tight, almost suffocatingly so, but Clint didn’t complain.

“You touching me like that felt incredible, Phil. I loved every second of it. I’m gonna play it in my head next time I’m touching myself, I’ll pretend it’s you, and - “

Phil made sound behind him and stopped moving. Clint held his breath, and waited. Phil’s body stayed tense, not relaxing with relief like it should if he’d come.

“Phil, are you okay?” Clint finally asked.

“I can’t. I want to, but it’s just… as soon as it gets to a certain point I can feel the panic coming and… I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Phil. It’s okay. I love you.” Clint desperately tried to say the right things. “I’m not disappointed.”

That got a bitter laugh, and Phil’s body relaxed.

“I am. Ah, I’m sorry, but I need to ask you to move.”

“Sure thing.” Clint could hear the slight strain in Phil’s voice, and knew he was having to make an effort to keep it together. Phil’s arms loosened and Clint rolled smoothly off the sofa, standing up and grabbing the waistband of his jeans. “I’ll, uh, just go clean up, okay?”

“Yeah. Good plan.” Phil was heaving himself into a sitting position on the sofa, and he still looked flushed, and, to Clint’s eyes, completely adorable. Clint wanted to lean in and kiss

him, but he wasn't sure that would be welcome right now, so instead he headed for the bathroom.

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Phil was lying in bed trying to get more than three pages into his book before he nodded off. It had been a long, tiring, stressful couple of weeks, and he was short on sleep, but having trouble relaxing enough to wind down. When his phone rang he sighed, expecting it to be yet another emergency. He saw Clint's name on the display.

"Clint, what's happening?" he asked, already swinging his legs out of bed.

"What? Oh, nothing. Sorry, I know it's late, I hope you weren't asleep." Clint sounded sheepish and Phil belatedly realized that this was a personal call.

"No," Phil said, "I was just reading. I'm glad you called."

"Well, we've both been pretty busy and we haven't seen much of each other this week, so I just thought, you know…"

"I miss you too," Phil said, smiling at himself for how giddy it made him feel to actually say something as sappy as that.

They chatted for a bit about work and Phil's neighbors and the cat that one of the new recruits had smuggled into the barracks, and now was apparently roaming the halls of SHIELD headquarters. Clint absolutely did not admit to leaving baloney sandwiches from the mess for it in the air ducts.

"This is nice," Phil said, now feeling warm and happy and much more relaxed than he had in days.

"Yeah."

Phil heard something in Clint's tone "Clint, is there something you wanted to talk about?"

"Uh, kinda? I, uh, sort of had an idea for something we could maybe try. But only if you want to. It's, like, just a suggestion."

"Understood."

Clint chuckled and Phil could tell he was less nervous now as he continued. "So, ah, a couple of weeks ago when I was over at your place, on the sofa, when we, ah…"

"Got your rocks off."

"Yeah. You, ah, said that sometimes you thought about touching me, while you were, uh, touching yourself."

"Yes." Phil had an inkling of where this was going, and he considered it. It made sense, and he wondered why Dr. Waite hadn't already suggested it.
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“So I was thinking that maybe we could, you know, ah, both touch ourselves and, ah...”

“You’re suggesting phone sex.”

“Well, that sounds kinda–”

“Like a great idea,” Phil said, hoping that the wide grin on his face was coming through.

“Really?” Clint sounded incredulous, like he’d been expecting Phil to apologize and decline.

“Yes, really. I’m moving my book out of the way and making sure the kleenex box is within reach.”

“Shit, okay. Wow, I didn’t expect you to be up for it, like right away.”

Phil just hummed into his phone as he got himself more comfortably propped against the pillows. “Are you naked?”

“Um, no, but I could be if you want?”

Phil closed his eyes and slid his hand into the briefs that he wore under his pajama bottoms. “Yes. I want to think about you sprawled out naked on your bed.”

“Jesus, Phil. ‘kay.”

There was a muffled creak and Phil could imagine Clint lying crossways on the bed, phone held to his ear with one hand. “Tell me what you’re doing,” Phil said.

“I’m, ah, well I’m already half-hard just from us talking about doing this, so I’m rubbing just under the head with the edge of my thumb. Is that a good spot for you, too?”

“Yes.” Phil was already breathless.

“Are you touching yourself? Tell me, Phil, please.” Clint’s plea was almost a whine.

“I’m fingering my balls. They’re very sensitive, but thinking about you, picturing you is what’s making me hard.”

“I’m… I’m hard now too. Just hearing your voice like this, knowing you’re touching yourself thinking about me, it’s turning me on so much, Phil.”

“Good. I love knowing that I can make you feel good.”

“You can. You do. You make me feel so damn good, Phil. Just being with you makes me feel good, but I love the way you touch me. And I really loved the way you stroked my cock that time.”

“We’ll do it again,” Phil said.

“If you want.”

“I do,” Phil’s arousal was making him bold. He closed his eyes and described the image in his mind aloud. “I want to touch you more than that. I want to fondle your balls and slide my fingers all the way from the base of your cock to the tip, lightly, just brushing the skin.”

“God Phil, yeah. I’m doing that. Just like that, pretending it’s your hand on me. Tell me what you’re doing.”

“I’m stroking myself slowly. I’ve got my hand wrapped loosely around my cock and I’m just giving it long, slow, easy strokes while I think about you spread out on your bed, touching yourself. You’re so gorgeous, Clint. I love looking at you.”

“You can, anytime you want. I don’t mind being naked, even if all you want to do is look. If that’s something you’d like to do?”

“What if I wanted to do more than just look?”

“Anything you want, Phil. Always. Tell me what you’d do if you were here right now.”

“I’d… I’d be kneeling next to you on the bed. I’d run my hands all over you, starting with your shoulders, and your arms. I’d feel your muscles under my hands. Then I’d move to your chest and I’d brush my fingertips across your nipples. Just like I did when you were here.”

“Yeah, that felt so good Phil. I loved it when you did that.”

“Good, because I want to do it again. I want to watch your cock twitch when I do it.”

“I’m so hard, Phil. I’m thinking about you playing with my nipples and it’s making me so hard.”

“I’m hard too. I’m stroking myself slowly while I’m talking you to, keeping myself just on the edge.”

“God, yeah. I’m getting close, Phil.”

“I can picture you, lying there, all spread out, your hand on your cock. I want to suck on your nipples, Clint,” Phil’s breath was coming his short harsh gasps now.

“Oh god, Phil, I’m gonna… I want that. Your mouth. I want you to… Fuck, I’m coming, Phil. I’m coming. Tell me…”

“I’m thinking about sucking your nipples and stroking your cock and making you come, Clint… making you… Yes.” The last word was a shout as Phil came hard into his own hand.

“God, I love you so much.” Clint’s voice sounded far away over the blood rushing in Phil’s ears.

“Love you too,” Phil said as soon as his breathing was back under control.

“That was awesome.”

Phil laughed. “Yes, it was pretty amazing.”

“Good. I mean, I’m glad it, uh, worked for you.”

“It did. I’m glad you thought of it.”

“Okay, so now I’m kinda blushing.”

“That probably looks very cute. I’m sorry I’m not there to see it.”

“Next best thing.”

“Yes. I should probably get some sleep now, though. I have an early meeting,” Phil said.

“Yeah, me too. See you for lunch?”

“Yes. Unless something comes up.”

“Cool, I’ll swing by your office.”

“Yes.”

“Uh, thanks. For the, uh, this sounds stupid.”

“Are you blushing again?”

“Yeah.” There was a pause. “I just… I’m so glad there’s stuff we can do, you know? Not because I need it or anything, but just because… I want to make you feel good in any way I can, Phil. I want you to be happy.”

“You make me happy. Us being together makes me happy.”

“Yeah, me too. I love you.”

“I love you too. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

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“So, Phil, how are things going?” Dr. Waite asked.

“I think they are going reasonably well.”

“You know what I’m going to say, next, don’t you?”

“You’re going to ask why I ‘think’ rather than ‘know’ and what ‘reasonably well’ means.” Phil smiled a little at his psychiatrist.

“Very good. You’re learning!”
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“Okay, I said ‘I think’ because of course I can only give you my perspective, not Clint’s, but from my perspective, things are going reasonably,” Phil quirked his lips into a smile again and stressed the word ironically, “well. And I said ‘reasonably well’ because there haven’t been any setbacks, and there’s been an interesting… development, since we last talked.”

“Oh, an interesting development! I’m all ears.” Dr. Waite clasped her hands together and leaned forward in her chair. Phil knew he was being lightly teased, but he didn’t mind. He and Rosalynn Waite had hit it off well from the start, and her keen wit was part of why. She actually reminded him of Clint a little in that respect.

Phil explained Clint’s idea about the phone sex, and how it had gone, which had Dr. Waite nodding thoughtfully.

“In fact, Doctor, I was somewhat surprised that it wasn’t something you’d suggested.”

Dr. Waite laughed, “You’ve found one of my biases, there, Phil. I didn’t suggest it because I didn’t think you’d be up for it, if you’ll pardon the terrible double-entendre.”

Phil grinned, “Yes, Clint was pretty surprised when I went for it as well. But it makes sense, I can touch myself, but he can’t touch me, yet, and whenever I’ve tried to orgasm with him around, either in the same room or cuddled up to him, it just hasn’t worked. So phone sex is a logical… interim solution to us getting each other off.”

“So, can you guess which two things I’m going to pick up on out of what you’ve just said?”

Phil thought for a minute. It was a truism that an intelligent person needed a psychiatrist who was at least at smart, quick, clever, whichever as themselves if they were going to make very much progress together, because therapy was a contract, and both parties had to bring their A-game to the table. Phil knew Dr. Waite wasn’t testing him, rather she was letting him discover things on his own terms, which reinforced his feelings of control over the process, and thus lowered his stress levels. Even though he could see behind the curtain, it still worked.

“You’re going to want me to talk about what I mean by it ‘hasn’t worked’ and you’re going to want to discuss my use of the term ‘interim solution’,” Phil said.

“Two for two. Here, have a lollypop.” Dr. Waite actually fished a candy out of a jar on her desk and tossed it to him. He tucked it into his breast pocket to give to Clint, later, feeling a little warm glow as he did. Which Dr. Waite had no doubt intended… She was that good. She also waited, in silence, for Phil to speak.

He sighed. “We’ve, ah, been working on me touching Clint sexually, as you know, and that’s been going pretty well. I can give him a hand job, and while I’m doing that, I start to get hard. But if I try to, ah, do anything about that, I start to tense up. It’s like the arousal is fighting with the anxiety, and the anxiety wins.”

“What, specifically, is the anxiety about?”

“I’m… I’m worried that I’m going to have a panic attack when I get hard.”

“When’s the last time that happened?”

“Um, about a month ago, I guess, while I was, ah, practicing masturbating.”

“So not while you were with Clint.”

“No.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

“About the panic attacks? I’ve told him I have them sometimes, and, ah, under what circumstances..”

“But you haven’t discussed with him what to do if you have one while he’s there.”

“No.”

“Well, that’s your first homework assignment, then. You need to plan it out with goals and objectives and contingencies. You need to decide what you want him to do, stay or leave, for instance, and under what circumstances. You need to tell him what not to do or say, and how you’re going to handle the debrief afterwards.”

Phil was nodding. Dr. Waite was right, of course, and yes, he should have already done this. But at the beginning, when their relationship was new and seemed so fragile, he hadn’t wanted to bring up a doomsday scenario. And since then, he’d been kind of hoping it wouldn’t happen at all…

“Yes. I’ll discuss it with him next time he comes over.”

“Good. Now moving on to your phrase ‘interim solution’…”

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“It’s next week, best guess. Probably Thursday or Friday, but maybe Saturday or even the week after,” Nat said.

The mission was big, complex, and speculative. Natasha had been gathering intel on a particular Hydra cell for months, using some of her contacts in the Russian underground. There had been whispers—only whispers—that a Hydra high-up was going to be attending a meeting of several local mafioso. Natasha had dug up the location of the meeting, but the exact time, and even the date, were elusive. The potential target was big enough that Hill and Fury had agreed to an unusually large outlay of SHIELD resources and personnel, on the off-chance that they’d get a shot at taking this particular Hydra goon out.

“And we have no idea what time?” Phil tried to keep his frustration in check, after all, it wasn’t Natasha’s fault that no one had the information they needed.

“No. None of the people I talked to, or bought information from, had any idea. They’re probably leaving it to the last minute to decide, for security reasons.”
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The next day Phil was going over the last of the plans in his office with Clint, who was standing behind him and peering over his shoulder at his computer screen.

“You’re sure you’re okay with Freeman as the third sniper? We could still call in someone with more experience,” Clint said as Phil paged through the operation’s personnel roster.

“You said he’s one of the best you’ve ever seen.”

“Well, yeah, he is, but this is a big op, and he’s only been backup before this,” Clint said.

Phil smiled at his computer screen.

“What?”

“I’m remembering an op where you were my second backup sniper,” Phil said with a glance over his shoulder at Clint and a fond look.

“Yeah, well, I hope he gets along with Jasper.”

“No reason he shouldn’t, is there?”

“No, ‘course not. I guess I’m just nervous ‘cause he’s one of my first batch of trainees as an instructor, and I recommended him for this op, and it’s important, and I want it to go well. I don’t want to screw it up on you,” Clint said.

“Even if Freeman misses the shot, you won’t have screwed up the mission, Clint. We’ve put together the best team we can, and all we can do now is go in and trust everyone to do their jobs to the best of their ability. Besides, if you trained him, Freeman won’t miss the shot. I’m sure of that.” Phil was smiling fondly again.

“I want to kiss you so much right now.” Clint said, planting one hip on the edge of Phil’s desk.

“Clint,” Phil said with a warning tone in his voice.

“I know, I know, not at the office. Sorry, I shouldn’t said anything, it was just going through my head, you know?”

“Hey, it’s okay. Look, why don’t you come over tonight?” Phil said.

“Are you sure? It’s wheels up at 6:30am tomorrow.” Clint was surprised Phil wanted him to come over the evening before an early mission departure.

“Just for a couple of hours. We’re going to be working all next week.”

“Yeah, okay. I’d like that. I’ll bring pizza.”

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They were sitting on the couch, kissing. Phil had one hand in Clint's hair and the other on his thigh, and his tongue was deep in Clint's mouth, as if he couldn't get enough. That was fine with Clint, because he was perfectly content to spend hours being thoroughly kissed by Phil. Clint had one hand on Phil's cheek and the other on his bicep, giving Phil the skin contact he craved in a way that felt safe and comfortable for him.

Clint moaned around Phil's tongue and consciously stopped himself from pushing closer. Much as he'd love to back Phil into the corner of the sofa and climb into his lap, he knew that wasn't an option, yet. Maybe one day, but for now this deep, passionate kissing was plenty.

All of a sudden, though, Phil's tongue withdrew and his hands moved, the one that had been on Clint's thigh was pushing back, hard. Clint opened his eyes to a brief view of Phil's face, eyes wide, mouth set in a hard thin line before Phil had scrambled back off the sofa and retreated to the far corner of the room, curled in on himself and looking for all the world like a wounded animal. Clint had a brief flash of memory, his mother curled into a corner, his father towering over her with a fist raised, and he knew what was happening.

Clint found himself standing and forced himself, against all his instincts, to turn his back on Phil and walk over to the dining table. He pulled out a chair and sat facing the kitchen, his back to the living room. He strained to hear Phil's harsh breathing and slowly counted to ten in his head before speaking.

"Phil, you're okay. I'm here and I'll do whatever you need me to do, whenever you can tell me what that is. I'm sitting at the dining table. My back is to you, but I can hear you breathing, so I know you're okay. Or, you know, sort of okay. I'm just going to sit here quietly and not move until you tell me what you want. I love you Phil."

Clint waited. He was good at waiting, but this was hard. He wanted to turn around and check on Phil. He wanted to wrap Phil up in his arms and hold him and stroke his hair and tell him everything was going to be okay. He wanted the bastards that did this to Phil to still be alive so that he could hunt them down and kill them again slowly. Very slowly.

He waited. He counted to one hundred in his head, then he waited some more, still listening to Phil's gasping breaths. He wanted to turn around and check on Phil, but he didn't. Being patient and gentle with Phil, being content with what they had together and not pushing for more, was easy. But this, this was hard. Clint's hands curled into fists on the table and he forced himself to unclench them and flex his fingers slowly in time to his breathing. He wanted to do something, anything, to make it better. But Clint knew he couldn't and that left him feeling so helpless, so frustrated and angry. He told himself that he had to calm down, that Phil needed him to be solid and steady. Clint clenched and unclenched his fists in time to long, slow, calming breaths, and waited some more.

His time sense told him it had been about ten minutes when he heard Phil whisper, "I love you, too."

"I know that, Phil," Clint said to the wall in front of him. "Whatever happens, I promise I will never doubt it. I'm going to turn around to check on you now, okay? I'm gonna stay sitting here, just turn and look."

“Okay.”

Clint swiveled in his seat and was relieved to see Phil sitting up, back against a bookcase, his arms wrapped around his knees. He was sweating and shaking, and Clint desperately wanted to wrap him in a blanket. Instead he turned back.

And waited some more.

“It wasn’t something you did,” Phil said. “I don’t know… it just happened, but it wasn’t something you did.

“Okay, that’s good to know, but even if it was, we’d work it out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Phil, would it be okay if I came and sat down next to you?”

“Not… not yet.”

“Okay. Do you want me to leave?”

“No. Unless you want–“

“No, Phil I don’t want to leave unless you need me to. I’ll stay for as long as you want me to be here. Always. I promise.”

“Yeah. Just give me a few minutes.”

“As long as you need, Phil. As long as you need. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Five minutes later he heard Phil get up and go into the bathroom. Clint took a couple of deep breaths and twisted and stretched the way he did when he was taking a break from his sniper position. Everything had tensed up and knotted while he’d been sitting here, worrying about Phil.

He heard the toilet flush and the water run in the sink. He settled back into his seat and waited. Phil came out of the bathroom and sat down on the sofa.

“You can come sit with me now.”

Phil’s voice still sounded shaky. “I’m going to make a detour to the kitchen to get you a drink, okay? Do you want water or juice or soda?”

“Juice.”

“Be right there.” Clint poured a glass of orange juice and carried it into the living room, glancing around for a blanket or jacket or something that he could drape around Phil’s shoulders. There was nothing, so instead he turned the thermostat up a couple of degrees.

“Here you go.” He put the glass of juice down on the coffee table in front of Phil, then sat down leaving a few inches of space between them.

Phil put his hand, palm up, on the cushions between them. “I love you and I want to be with you,” he said, his voice still shaking.

Clint laced his fingers through Phil’s. “I love you and I want to be with you.”

Phil blew out his breath. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, but you don’t have anything to apologize for. It’s not your fault.”

“I know. I… I still don’t know what set me off. We were kissing, and I was getting a little hard, but just a bit, and suddenly…” Phil fell silent and squeezed Clint’s hand tightly.

“It’s okay. It happened, it’s over. It may never happen again. But if it does, we’ll deal with it, just like this. Right?”

“Yeah, right.” Phil’s tone was bitter.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s just, we’ve been doing so well, I guess I let myself hope that nothing like this would happen.”

Clint desperately wanted to give Phil a hug, just to hold and reassure him. And, if he was being honest with himself, he needed the comfort as well.

“Anyway, it’s late," Phil said. "You probably need to get going if you’re going to get any sleep tonight.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you want me to go, I will of course, but if you’d feel more comfortable if I stayed… It won’t be the first time I’ve crashed on your sofa.”

“I can’t ask you–”

“You can ask me anything, Phil. I’ll sleep just fine, and I don’t need anything at my place. All my gear is at SHIELD, so we can head straight over there in the morning.”

“You’re sure? You don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind at all. I want to stay, if you want me to.” Clint worked hard to keep his voice calm and even, making it an offer but not pressuring Phil to accept.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’d… I’d like that.”

“Good, then I will. So, what do you want to watch until we get tired enough to actually fall asleep?”

They settled on Storage Wars and sat next to each other on the sofa, holding hands and watching bad television until Phil’s head finally started to nod.

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The next afternoon, Clint and Phil were checking into a three-star hotel overlooking the theater district.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather me change your room, sir? We have several larger ones available.”

“The one we booked will be fine, thank you,” Phil said with an unassuming, smile. The hotel clerk shot a glance over Phil’s shoulder at Clint, and then quickly looked back at his computer screen. Phil was 90% sure that Clint had leered at the young man, and would have elbowed him in the ribs, if it weren’t for the fact that, well, two guys with a week-long reservation checking into a hotel room with one queen-sized bed led to certain assumptions that were actually good for their cover. Assumptions that weren’t entirely incorrect, either.

They’d discussed it at length during the mission planning phase.

“So either we book into separate rooms and spend a week going past each other in the lobby pretending we don’t know each other, or we book into a room together, as a couple,” Phil had explained.

“And if we go with separate rooms, then we can’t even, like, eat together, because we’re not supposed to know each other, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I know which option I prefer.”

“Yes, me too. It’s even a good idea, mission-wise, because the fewer people we have staying at the same hotel, busily pretending they don’t know each other, the better.” Freeman and Sitwell had separate rooms, as did Diaz and Jefferson. Each sniper got their own handler for this mission because of its intensity and potential length. Staring through a scope for eight hours a day, possibly for days on end was nerve-wracking even for the best snipers. The handler’s job was to be a steady voice and a listening ear, making sure that the pressure didn’t mount too high, and that the boredom didn’t get incapacitating. Clint and Phil were old hands at this particular dance, and Diaz had worked with Jefferson a few times before, but Freeman was brand new.

Which was why he got the easiest shift and the best vantage point. They’d found an older hotel (with windows that actually opened) overlooking one particular alleyway. An alleyway onto which the kitchen door of a small, exclusive Italian restaurant opened. The intel they had indicated that the meet was in the restaurant, and they were reasonably sure their mark would use the back door that led from the kitchens to the alley.
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The hotel room Phil unlocked and stepped into had the third-best vantage point on the alley. It was also small, featuring a bed, a sofa, a bureau with a tv and coffeemaker, and a lamp that looked like it had been rescued from a 1970s rec room.

Clint immediately stepped over to the window and opened it.

“Okay?” Phil asked. The one reason they would change rooms is if the sight lines weren’t as good as what Clint had extrapolated from the maps and satellite photos.

“Yeah, fine. I’ve got 75% of the alley, and a full view of the door.”

Phil nodded. The other two rooms covered more of the alley, Freeman’s even giving a part-view of the street to give the sniper more time to see the mark coming and line up a shot. Clint wouldn’t need the extra time.

“Good. I’ll check in with the others while you set up,” Phil said, looking around. The close quarters were going to present some logistical difficulties, but nothing they couldn’t cope with. They’d been stuck in worse places together for days on end, and this time they would be able to go out and walk around when Clint wasn’t on shift. Phil was in charge of the op, but he trusted Sitwell and Jefferson to run things in his absence. And he’d still be on comms if he was needed, of course.

While Clint unpacked his rifle (even he had agreed that this wasn’t a good mission for a bow) Phil moved the coffeemaker to the bathroom counter to make room for his laptop and comms equipment. He ran through the standard systems check then checked-in individually with the other four agents. Everyone reported ready; Diaz would be starting her shift that afternoon (Freeman got the morning, and Clint the overnight). Once he was confident that everything was going to plan, Phil looked at his watch.

“We’ve got a few hours before your shift starts. Do you want to head out and get something to eat?”

“Sounds like a plan, boss,” Clint said with a fond smile. Both of them were now well aware that ‘boss’ had become an endearment long ago. “What’re you in the mood for?”

“We could just walk for a bit, see what looks good?” Phil was conscious of the fact that they might be cooped up in this small room for days, so wanted to get both of them out as much as possible.

“Sounds like fun.”

Half an hour later they were sitting in a lovingly restored 1950s diner eating burgers and sipping milkshakes. Strawberry for Clint, chocolate for Phil. Clint had a wide grin on his face, and Phil found himself smiling back.

“What’s up?” Phil asked.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. I’m just having a good time, is all. I mean, I know we’re working and all, but this…” Clint waved a french fry to indicate the two of them and the diner. “It kind of

feels like a date. It's nice."

"It is. Is… Would you like us to go out together more often, Clint?"

"Not really. Maybe just sometimes. I love cuddling up on the sofa with you at your place, you know that, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. I just meant it was nice to be out, together, kind of like a normal couple. And I don't mean we're not a normal couple, just that we don't have normal lives, so this is…" Clint floundered and started to turn red.

"Nice," Phil said, reaching across the table to take his hand.

Clint's grin got even wider as Phil tangled their fingers together on the formica tabletop.

"Love you," he said quietly, obviously not expecting a response.

"Love you too," Phil said with what felt like a shy little smile. He loved seeing the happiness on Clint's face when he said it. 'How the hell did I ever get this lucky?' he wondered.

Later that evening he was ensconced in one corner of the sofa with his laptop while Clint knelt in position by the window, his eyes and his rifle trained on the alley.

"You're just playing solitaire over there, aren't you?" Clint quipped.

"Yes, I need a black seven," Phil deadpanned back, just to hear Clint laugh. They talked about past missions, they spent an hour in comfortable silence. Phil took watch while Clint got up to stretch his legs and use the bathroom. They talked some more, about the future this time, in vague terms. Clint asked Phil what he planned to do when he couldn't be a SHIELD agent any more.

"I've never really thought about it."

"Why's that? Seems to me you'd be the kind of guy who had a 401k and a down payment already made on a fishing cabin or a Winnebago or something." Phil could tell from his tone that Clint was only half-serious, but for him to be asking about the future at all…

"To be honest, I guess I never figured I'd live to see retirement. The job is pretty dangerous, and, well–" Phil stopped, not knowing how to say the next bit.

"When you're one of the best, you get sent on the toughest missions, the ones you might not come back from. Yeah, I get that. I never thought much about it either, until now." Clint's voice was quiet, and Phil didn't push any further.

Nothing happened for the rest of the night and as the sun crept above the horizon, a chirpy voice came over the comms.

"Agent Freeman reporting for duty, sir."

"You're fifteen minutes early, Agent," Phil said mildly. *"Finish your coffee and check back in in ten."*

"Yes sir," came the good-humored reply.

"Is he always that cheerful?" Phil asked Sitwell over the comms.

"Far as I can tell, yes. He wakes up chipper. It's disgusting," came the answer.

From his position by the window Clint chuckled. "I have half a mind to knock off ten minutes early and let him take over."

"Clint," Phil's tone held a very mild warning.

"I know, boss. I wasn't serious."

Five minutes before the end of Clint's shift, Phil checked in with Freeman and Sitwell and confirmed that they were in position. Phil went through the official hand-off, then singled Clint to stand down. Clint climbed to his feet and stretched, his back crunching and popping audibly. Phil heaved himself off the sofa and did the same.

"Do you want to get some food first, or do you just want to hit the sack?" Phil asked. They'd both been awake for 20 hours, and while they could function for longer if the mission required it, this one didn't, and they both needed to be sharp for their next shift tomorrow night.

"Nah, I'm just gonna go straight to sleep. Try to get my schedule switched around. You?" Clint was closing the window and drawing the curtains to block out as much light as possible.

"I could definitely use some shut-eye," Phil said. "I'll just be a minute in the bathroom."

"No problem, take your time."

Phil tried not to feel self-conscious as he grabbed his pajamas out of his bag and took them into the bathroom with him. Clint was used to him changing in the bathroom, he'd always done it, from their very first mission together. It shouldn't feel different now that Clint knew why, but somehow it did. He sighed as he changed quickly, not looking in the mirror until he was dressed again. Then he cleaned his teeth and used the toilet. Picking up his suit pants and shirt, he gave himself a rueful look before heading back out into the tiny hotel room.

Where he found Clint making up a bed on the sofa with one of the pillows from the bed and a spare blanket from the closet.

"You didn't need to do that."

"Huh?" Clint turned a confused expression on him.

"I mean, thanks, I appreciate it, but I could have done it myself."

"But why would you… You don't think I'm letting you sleep on the sofa, do you Phil?"

“Of course I’m sleeping on the sofa. You’re the one that has to hold position kneeling on the floor for eight hours a day. You need to sleep comfortably,” Phil said.

“And you don’t? You’re in charge of the whole mission. You need to be sharp.”

“Sitwell and Jefferson are perfectly capable of handling the mission, and you know it. Me being in charge is just rank.”

“Well, anyway, you get the bed. I spent eight years sleeping in a pile of straw that smelled of elephant shit, I can sleep anywhere. The sofa’ll be luxury.”

“The sofa will be hell on your back,” Phil argued.

“Flip you for it.”

“No. You’re taking the bed.” Phil crossed his arms over his chest and gave Clint his best ‘Don’t fuck with me’ look.

“Fine. I’ll take the bed tonight, you get it tomorrow. We’ll take turns. That’s fair,” Clint said with a decisive nod.

Phil decided not to argue any further right now, when they were both tired. They could discuss it rationally tomorrow, over breakfast, and he would make Clint see that he needed to be fit and rested for the mission. So he nodded as well, and Clint looked relieved.

“Great. Well, I guess this is goodnight then.”

“Yes.”

“Feels kinda weird. I guess we’ll get used to it, though.” Clint didn’t move towards the bed, and Phil waited. “Uh, I know it’s a mission and everything, but, uh… how would you feel about a goodnight hug?”

“I’d feel pretty good about it,” Phil said, and that earned him another brilliant smile, and Clint opening his arms in invitation. Phil stepped into them, tucking his face into Clint’s neck and and holding on tightly while Clint carefully laid his hands on the backs of Phil’s shoulders.

“I love you,” Clint whispered.

“I love you too.” Phil pulled back and brushed a light kiss across Clint’s cheek. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

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Phil slept lightly, and poorly, and woke up with a cramp in his left calf, a mild headache, and a growling stomach. He glanced over at where Clint was sprawled out on the bed, one arm thrown across his eyes no doubt in an attempt to block the midday sun that was seeping in through the hotel’s curtains.
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“We should’ve brought blackout curtains,” Clint said, so Phil stopped pretending to still be asleep.

“I’ll get some sent over.” Phil swung his bare feet onto the floor and reached for his laptop.

“I don’t know how you can navigate SHIELD’s requisition paperwork before coffee,” Clint said, getting out of bed and stretching. Phil allowed himself a quick glance up at Clint’s bare chest, then looked back at his screen.

“Years of practice,” he said, even though he knew well that Clint hadn’t meant the question seriously.

“Yeah, well get them to send some decent coffee, too, while you’re at it, this stuff,” Clint waved one of the packs the hotel had supplied out the bathroom door, “isn’t fit for human consumption.”

“We can go out and get food and real coffee as soon as you like.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna grab a shower first. But I’ll be ready in like, ten minutes, tops.”

Phil filled in the requisition forms and hit send. SHIELD was efficient enough at this sort of thing that his phone would ring while they were out at breakfast, setting up a meet to hand off a package. The blackout curtains (and coffee) would come packaged in a shopping bag, and some trainee agent would be tasked with handing it off to them at a busy tourist spot. It was good practice for the trainees, and a wise precaution, even if they were pretty sure this op was perfectly secure.

After Phil had his turn in the shower, they headed out to a diner that served all-day breakfast. After a leisurely meal and an hour spent wandering around the city making sure they didn’t have a tail, they headed to a gym near their hotel where all the agents on the current op had been set up with memberships. SHIELD had learned from bitter experience that a bored, restless agent got distracted, missed things, made mistakes. So whenever possible, even on active ops, agents got a chance to work out every day. After the gym they wandered around the city some more, made the pick up from the trainee agent, and headed back to the hotel in plenty of time for Clint’s next shift. As they stepped into the lobby, Phil slid an arm around Clint’s waist.

He felt Clint stiffen a little, but didn’t move.

“Phil?” Clint asked in a hushed tone. “Is there something wrong?”

“Nope.” Phil gave a little squeeze.

“Oh.” He heard the surprise in Clint’s voice. Clint didn’t say anything more until they got onto the elevator.

“That was about our cover, right?”

“Mostly. I want to make sure that the desk staff just thinks of us as ‘the cute gay couple in room 807’.”

“Cute, huh? What’s the other part?”

“What other part?”

“You said ‘mostly’.”

“I’m trying to get used to being able to touch you casually. Not just PDAs, but in general. Since this is an op, and part of my brain thinks of it as acting, it’s easier for me, so I wanted to take advantage of that. I’m sorry, I should have asked you first.”

“You don’t need to ask permission to touch me, Phil. Not ever. And it’s fine. More than fine. I like it. A lot.”

“Good.”

Back in their room, Phil set up his laptop and Clint unpacked and assembled his rifle. Phil took the hand-off from Jefferson and Diaz, and Clint took his position at the window. For the next eight hours they chatted about everything and nothing, and shared comfortable silences in between. Just like they always did. Just like they had always done.

This time they went out for supper just after dawn, finding a 24-hour sushi bar.

“Remember the first time you got me to eat this stuff? That op in SanFran?” Clint asked, dexterously picking up a piece of tuna sashimi with his chopsticks.

“How could I forget the look on your face when we walked into the restaurant and you finally realized that I hadn’t been joking about the raw fish all along,” Phil said, bumping Clint’s knee under the table with his own.

“And then I actually had to go through with it.”

“You could have just had the teriyaki. I would never have teased you about it.”

“I know,” Clint said, catching Phil’s eyes and holding them. “You never tease me about anything. I kinda love you for that.”

“Just kind of?” Phil asked, his gaze steady and eyes bright.

“Kind of, sort of, always and forever,” Clint said softly, and Phil’s breath caught in his throat. “That, uh, PDA thing that you’re working on. Does it include kissing?”

“It could.”

Clint leaned forward across the small table, and Phil carefully stopped himself from glancing around before doing the same. The kiss was soft and sweet and brief enough to not make him uncomfortable. And the smile on Clint’s face when they parted was luminous.

After they’d eaten they walked around the city some more, playing at being tourists, then hit the gym again.

“Anything in particular you want to do?” Phil asked once they’d showered and changed.

Clint stifled a yawn. “You okay with going back to the hotel and racking up a pay-per-view bill for an hour or so, then bed?”

“Perfectly okay.” They held hands all the way back to the hotel.

Back in their room, Phil stepped out of his shoes and stripped off his jacket and tie. Clint had bounced onto the freshly-made up bed and was already flipping through channels.

“You mind what we watch?”

“Not at all. I’ll probably fall asleep half-way through whatever it is.”

“Yeah,” Clint grinned at him. Phil had, to his shame, fallen asleep a couple of times cuddled up on his own sofa with Clint while watching a movie. He’d apologized profusely, but Clint had just laughed. ‘Do you have any idea how wonderful it is to have you fall asleep in my arms like that?’

Clint picked a rerun of an 80s TV show with lots of car chases and explosions, and sure enough, Phil nodded off. When he woke up in a semi-dark room, he found that Clint had pulled the bedspread over him, and curled up on the sofa.

Phil got up and padded as quietly as he could into the bathroom. He changed into pajamas, skipped his teeth so as not to run the water, and headed back to bed.

“G’night Phil,” Clint said softly from the sofa.

“Sorry, I was trying to be quiet.”

“Mission,” Clint mumbled. Meaning that because they were on an active mission, the slightest noise or movement in the room would waken him.

“Of course.” Phil paused and crouched down by the sofa that Clint had folded himself onto to sleep. He laid one hand softly on Clint’s shoulder and brushed Clint’s lips with his in a light kiss. “Good night.”

Only after he’d climbed into bed did he remember that he’d meant to insist Clint take the bed. ‘Tomorrow,’ he told himself firmly. ‘I’ll clear that up first thing in the morning…’

The next day were a repeat of the previous two. The mission was boring, but important, and, as Clint was quick to point out, kneeling on a carpeted floor in a three-star hotel room was one of the most luxurious sniper perches he’d ever had. Everything was going smoothly until they’d eaten ‘supper’ after Clint’s overnight shift, and Clint insisted that it was Phil’s turn to sleep in the bed.

“I thought we went over this, you need to be alert and rested. You take the bed,” Phil was keeping his voice level and his tone reasonable.

“And I thought that we were taking turns, like I suggested on the first night. That’s what we’ve been doing for the past three days, and it’s your turn.” Clint was adamant and Phil knew he was fighting a losing battle. Clint’s sense of fairness was unshakable when it came to this kind of situation, and Phil had to admit to himself that in his heart he knew Clint performance on the mission wouldn’t suffer from sleeping on the sofa every second night.

“Fine,” he said tiredly. “We’ll take turns like you said.”

Clint just nodded. “Do you want the bathroom first?”

“No, that’s fine, you go ahead.” Phil needed to inventory his clean shirts and underwear, and decide at what point to call for a re-supply run. They didn’t expect the mission to last longer than a week, but if the mark didn’t show, then exactly when the plug got pulled would depend on whether something else came up that needed the SHIELD resources that this op was tying up. Phil was in the middle of making up the sofa into a bed for Clint when the man himself came out of the bathroom wearing sleep pants and a faded t-shirt and looking worried.

“Hey, thanks. You didn’t need to…” Clint was staring at the carpet. “I’m, uh, sorry for uh, being a jerk about the taking turns thing. I just think that–”

“Clint, it’s fine. You’re right; taking turns is fair.”

“So, uh, you’re not mad at me. We’re, uh, okay?”

A lightbulb went on in Phil’s head. This was the closest thing they’d had to an argument since they’d become a couple, work-related or not. “We’re fine, Clint. I promise. Come here.” Phil pulled him into a hug and felt Clint relax.

“I love you,” Clint whispered.

“I know. I love you too. But right now,” Phil said, pulling back, “My bladder is screaming at me, so…”

“Yeah, go.” Clint stepped back and took the pillow out of Phil’s hands.

By the time he’d finished in the bathroom and changed into pajamas, Clint was curled up on the sofa, looking adorable, as usual. Phil crouched down to kiss him, lingering a little this time for more than a quick brush of lips.

“Goodnight,” Clint said with a beautiful smile.

“Sleep well,” Phil answered and climbed into bed. He switched out the light and rolled over, but sleep wouldn’t come.

After the third time he’d shifted trying to find a comfortable position, Clint’s soft voice came across the dark room. “Is everything okay Phil?”

Phil could hear the worry in it. His instinct was of course to say, ‘It’s fine, go to sleep, Clint,’ but he knew that would be futile. So instead Phil said what he actually felt: “This is stupid.”

“Uh, what is?”

Phil rolled onto his back and stared at the hotel room ceiling in the dark. “This. You on the sofa, me in the bed.”

“I… I thought you said it was fine,” Clint sounded worried now.

“No, that’s not…” Phil blew out his breath in frustration. “Eyes,” he said, then reached over and snapped on the bedside lamp. He sat up and saw Clint was doing the same, worry etched in deep lines on his forehead. “Clint, come here. Please?”

“Sure.” Clint got up off the sofa and padded over to the side of the bed. Phil turned the covers down and patted the sheet. “What?” Clint looked at him with wide eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. We’re both wearing pajamas. It’ll be fine.”

“But… mission?” Phil had been very clear that there would be no fooling around when they were on an active mission, so Clint’s implied question wasn’t at all surprising.

“For sleeping, Clint. Not fooling around. Besides, I think the mission is better served by both of us getting a good night’s sleep, don’t you?”

“If I’d realized that argument would work, I woulda used it first,” Clint said. “You’re sure?” he asked again, and then grimaced, probably realizing that it sounded like he was doubting Phil.

“It’ll be exactly the same as when we fall asleep together on the sofa in my living room,” Phil said.

“Well, not exactly the same,” Clint said, “but my back’s not gonna argue with you.” He climbed into bed beside Phil and lay on his back.

“Comfy?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“Good, then could you get the light?”

“Sure.” Clint snapped the light back off. “Goodnight Phil.”

“Goodnight Clint.”

The next morning Phil woke up to find himself spooned around Clint, one arm thrown over his chest holding him close, his nose tucked into the space between Clint’s neck and shoulder. He shifted his head back so that Clint’s hair would stop tickling him. “Clearly my subconscious and I need to have a long, serious talk,” he said, and got an appreciative chuckle from a clearly wide awake Clint.

“No complaints here. Uh, Phil?”

“Yes.”

“I’d really like to roll over and kiss you, if you’re comfortable with that?”

“Yes, okay.” Clint rolled over slowly, carefully ending up with an inch of space between their bodies when he was facing Phil. Phil reached out and pulled him close. The feeling of lying in bed with Clint in his arms was heady, almost exhilarating. He could do this. This was something he could have with the man he loved. Clint kissed him gently and it was all Phil could do to keep himself from rolling Clint onto his back, climbing on top of him, and plundering his mouth. But he kept himself to one long, gentle kiss, and pulled away. They were on a mission, after all.

“Love you,” Clint said with a brilliant smile on his face.

“Love you too. Do you need the bathroom first?”

“Nope, go ahead.” And so another day began.

That ‘night’ they climbed into bed together, kissed goodnight, and Clint snuggled into Phil’s arms with a contented sigh.

Two days later Diaz made the shot. So they all packed up and went home.

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Clint poked his head into Phil’s office. “Got a minute to talk?”

“Yes.”

Clint closed the door behind himself and sat down on the sofa. Phil got up from behind his desk and sat down next to him.

“What’s up?” he asked, trying not to steel himself for bad news and failing.

Clint sucked in a breath and then said in a rush, “Sleeping alone last night sucked.”

"It sucked a lot." Phil nodded his agreement, and grinned at Clint’s surprised laugh.

“Yeah, well.” Clint leaned back against the cushions.

There was silence for a minute, and then Phil said, “Move in with me.”

“What?”

“You already spend most of your downtime at my place, half your clothes are there... The only reason I didn't ask you a while ago is because I wasn't going to ask you to move in with me just to sleep on my sofa, but now that we seem to have that part figured out.” Phil’s voice wavered. “Unless you don't want to, I mean I understand if you’d rather…”
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Clint put his hand out in their usual ritual. "I love you and I want to be with you," he said firmly.

Phil took his hand and repeated back, "I love you and I want to be with you." Then he waited a beat before asking, "But?"

"No but, Phil. There will never, ever be a 'but' at the end of that sentence. You really want me to move in with you?"

"Yes."

"Okay then, I will."

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The mission had gone from cakewalk to clusterfuck in the blink of an eye, and they'd had to shoot their way out. Because they'd been undercover, Clint and Natasha only had concealed pistols and limited extra ammo to deal with five heavily-armed drug dealers and the three AIM agents who were selling to them. One of the AIM agents had recognized Clint, and even though Clint had put a bullet in his head before he'd managed to finish saying "Hawkeye," the damage was done. Clint and Nat dove behind separate crates and spent a tense ten minutes picking off the bad guys one at a time. Even with the advantage of their comm channel and Phil in the van hacked into the warehouse's surveillance cameras, it was touch-and-go.

Clint ducked as another spray of AK fire sent splinters flying everywhere. One of them stuck him in the cheek and he winced. He didn't realize he'd made any noise though, until Phil's voice came over the comms.

"Hawkeye, are you hurt?"

"Just a splinter, boss. I promise."

"Natasha one of them is moving along the south wall towards your position," Phil said, and Clint breathed out. He could only imagine what it must be like for Phil, stuck in the van with an incomplete picture of what was happening. *"Backup in three minutes,"* came his clipped voice again.

Clint wasn't sure that they had three minutes, but he sure as hell wasn't going to tell Phil that. Another spray of fire and a splinter got him in the temple this time. He couldn't afford to cover his face, he needed to be able to spot the guy when he… Clint fired and the guy with the AK screamed and went down.

"Got him. Where's my next bogey, Phil?"

"Behind you, high!" Phil wasn't quite shouting, but it was the closest Clint had ever heard Phil come to losing it over the comms. He twisted onto his back, shot the drug dealer in the eye, and rolled out of the way of the burst of fire.

"I'm okay," he gasped. *"Nat, how're you doing?"*
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“I’m out of ammo,” came the answer, then a grunt.

“Natasha?” Phil’s voice over the comms was more controlled now, but Clint could still hear the worry in it.

“This one’s down,” Nat answered. *“We got any more?”*

“I don’t see any movement, but that doesn’t mean–“

“I know. We’ll be careful,” Clint said with a fond smile that he hoped Phil could hear. *“Nat, I’m coming around from the west.”*

“Roger.”

“Hawkeye, Widow, backup has arrived and they’re coming in via the south door,” Phil said crisply.

“Roger, make sure they have our positions. I’ve done enough shooting for one afternoon,” Clint said.

The backup team swept efficiently towards Clint and Nat, making sure there were no more bad guys lurking. After that they swung into routine clean-up, headed by Jasper Sitwell, and Phil commandeered a car to take Clint and Nat back to base.

Phil seemed tense and Clint wanted to ask him what was wrong, but he figured it was best to wait and do that in private. Except that Phil hustled them straight into debrief. That was understandable; since an AIM agent had identified Clint by sight, they had to review procedures and make sure it was a one-off, just bad luck, and not that AIM had detailed information about SHIELD personnel.

Debrief took three hours by which time Clint wanted nothing more than a long hot shower. But as they finally trailed out of the conference room, Phil asked, “Do you need to go to medical?” Phil’s voice was tight and there was obviously something bothering him, but Clint had no idea what it might be.

“Huh? No, no, like I told you on the comms, it’s just a couple of scratches from the splinters. I’m fine, really.”

“Home then?”

“Sure, home sounds great.” Home meant a hot shower and comfy clothes and cuddling on the sofa with Phil. Home would be awesome.

Buckled back into a SHIELD car with Phil driving, Clint could see the tension in his frame. There was definitely something wrong, but Clint couldn’t figure out what. He hadn’t fucked up during the op or broken any rules; Phil would have brought that up during debrief. Was Phil still worried about him being identified? About the fact that he might not be able to do undercover work with Nat any more?

“Phil?” Clint finally asked, his tone cautious.

“Just wait until we get home, okay?” Phil said, and Clint saw his knuckles tighten further on the steering wheel.

“Sure.” Clint closed his eyes and tilted his head back against the seat and tried, unsuccessfully, not to worry about whatever it was.

They parked the car in a visitor’s slot in the garage and rode the elevator up to their floor. Phil pulled out his keys and unlocked the door, then stepped aside to let Clint in first. Still wondering what the hell was wrong, Clint stopped in the entryway to punch the pass-code into Phil’s security system. Behind him, he heard Phil locking up.

Clint kicked off his boots, then, not knowing what to do, he waited, hovering in the hallway. Phil turned, his expression undecipherable, then crowded Clint up against the wall and kissed him desperately.

‘Ah,’ thought one part of Clint’s brain. ‘Fuck this is so hot,’ thought another. Phil’s hands were on his chest, fingers working the buckles and zipper of the leather jacket he was still wearing, then pushing it up and off his shoulders. Clint tried to move to shrug it off, but Phil pressed in further, trapping him against the wall as if he was afraid that Clint would try to escape, pinning him chest-to-chest and mouth-to-mouth. The jacket thumped to the floor. With his arms now free, Phil shrugged off his suit jacket. Then one of Phil’s hands in Clint’s hair, gripping firmly and the other was tugging his t-shirt out of his pants.

That, and that fact that Phil’s tongue was plundering his mouth, was enough for Clint’s cock to harden in the confines of his tactical boxer-briefs. Phil must felt it because he slid one of his legs between Clint’s thighs and ground against him. He also pulled away from Clint’s mouth and moaned.

“Yeah. Clint. Fuck.” Phil’s hands were up under his t-shirt, shoving the fabric towards his armpits. “This. Off,” he said, then nipped at the sensitive skin under the hinge of Clint’s jaw.

Despite how turned on he was, Clint felt a nagging worry. He’d never seen Phil like this, desperate and needy. He was afraid that Phil was going to push himself too far and that something… bad would happen.

“Phil,” he said, dragging in a breath “Maybe we should slow down a little.”

Phil’s teeth left his neck, and he was staring Clint in the face, eyes hard and bright and piercing. Phil deliberately rolled his hips, rubbing his own hard cock against Clint’s. Clint gasped.

“I need this. I need you. I need as much of you as I can handle right now. Please.” The last word was a whine, and Phil rolled his hips again.

“Anything you need, Phil. Anything I can give you. Always,” Clint said.

“Right now I need you to take your shirt off,” Phil said, unbuttoning his own dress shirt and tugging it and his undershirt out of his waistband, “and put your hands on my back.”

The minute Clint's t-shirt was over his head, Phil captured his mouth again, pressing almost painfully hard with lips and demanding tongue. Clint moaned around Phil's tongue, incredibly turned on by the way Phil was pushing him against the wall. He would never admit it in a million years, but this particular scenario was embarrassingly close to one of the fantasies about Phil that Clint had harbored years ago, long before he knew about Phil's… issues.

Phil's free hand was on his chest, teasing one nipple with the ball of his thumb. Phil's hips rocked slowly, deliberately, against his. Clint moaned into the kiss and put his hands carefully on Phil's back, a couple of inches above his belt, and slid them very slowly upwards, dragging a moan out of Phil. Clint was reveling in the warm feel of Phil's skin under his palms. He suppressed the urge to ask, 'Are you sure; is this okay?' and instead tried to abandon himself to the sensations.

Phil's hand slid down Clint chest to his belt. Phil's mouth left his. "Can I?" Phil asked, breathless, his fingers on the button of Clint's jeans. "I want to make you come."

"Yeah, god yeah, Phil."

Phil dexterously unbuttoned Clint's jeans and unzipped his fly, then slid one hand into his briefs. Clint moaned again at the first touch of Phil's fingers to his hard, throbbing cock. There was a shuffle as Phil re-aligned himself so that he was straddling one of Clint's thighs and leaning heavily against him, still pinning him to the wall. Clint could feel the hard bulge of Phil's cock rubbing against his hip, and Phil rocked against him in a rhythm that matched the long slow pulls of his hand on Clint's hard length.

Clint's world narrowed to the feel of Phil's hand on his cock, Phil's tongue in his mouth, Phil rocking against him slowly, deliberately. Not knowing what else Phil wanted from him, Clint kneaded the thick muscles of his shoulders in the same slow rhythm.

Phil's mouth left his, and between harsh breaths he whispered, "My heart stopped when that guy jumped you. It started again when I saw you roll out from under him. For a second I thought I'd lost you. Love you so much."

"Love you too Phil, always."

"Wanted to have you naked. Wanted to undress you and touch you everywhere, but I couldn't wait. Needed this."

"Anything, Phil. Anything."

Phil moaned into the side of Clint's neck and his rhythm sped up, "You gonna come for me Clint? Talk to me. Tell me how it feels."

"Feels so good, Phil. You hand on me feels amazing. And your body against mine, I love that. Love it. Oh, yeah. That's it Phil, just like that. That's perfect. I'm so close, Phil," Clint said as Phil stroked him.

Phil was working his cock harder and faster now, and rubbing against him desperately.

“Clint,” he gasped, his voice raw and needy and desperate and sounding like sex itself. Clint came in Phil's hand, his hips jerking reflexively. Phil moaned and rocked against him harder, faster. “Clint, I… ah.”

Clint felt Phil’s body spasm and start to shake. Clint held himself perfectly still, holding Phil’s shoulders. Waiting. Hoping.

Phil buried his face in Clint’s shoulder, and dragged in a long, gasping breath. Clint relaxed a little.

“I’m okay.” Phil whispered, still shaking, still pressing Clint hard against the wall, his legs clamped around Clint’s thigh with a vice-like grip. “I came, and I’m okay.”

“Good. That’s good.” Clint whispered back, moving just enough to rub small circles with his thumbs on Phil’s shoulder blades.

“I just need a minute,” Phil whispered again, his voice cracking.

“As long as you need Phil. Anything you need.” Clint could feel wetness on his neck where Phil’s face was pressed tightly against his skin. “That was amazing, Phil. I love you so much,” Clint said after a minute.

“I love you too. Thank you.”

“What for?” Clint asked with a rough chuckle. “You did all the work.” He was trying to lighten up the atmosphere a little, still worried about Phil’s state of mind.

Phil didn’t answer but a minute later he raised his head and looked at Clint with red-rimmed eyes, then kissed him softly again and again. As he did, his body relaxed, his fierce grip releasing. Instead of pinning Clint to the wall, Phil was now leaning against him tiredly.

“I guess we’d better go get cleaned up,” Phil said after a few more kisses.

“Yeah. You go first. I’ll order us some food. Dunno ‘bout you, but I’m starving.”

“I could eat.” Phil stood up, taking his weight off Clint, but not letting go of him. “I… that was…”

Clint brought one hand up to cup Phil’s damp cheek. “I know. Me too,” he said, and was rewarded with a brilliant smile. “I love it when you smile at me like that. You’re gorgeous.”

“I’m sticky.” Phil said, leaning in for a quick kiss before finally pulling away. “Try the new Indian place on 7th. They’re fast.”

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“So, how’s your sex life?” Dr. Wait asked brightly, clasping her hands together and leaning forward with a smile.
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Clint laughed out loud and Phil grinned. Clint shot a look at Phil and then answered, "Awesome."

"Glad to hear that, do you agree with Clint's assessment, Phil?" the doctor asked, turning her gaze on him.

"Well, considering that we now actually have one, I'd say it's pretty good," Phil said.

"Is there a disconnect here, between Phil's 'pretty good' and Clint's 'awesome'?" Dr. Wait asked.

"Phil's still worried that I'm disappointed about the things we can't do together. I'm just happy about the stuff we can do," Clint said, leaning back into the sofa cushions with a grin on his face.

Rather than addressing Clint's assessment immediately, Dr. Wait turned to Phil. "I'd like you to tell me, in detail, about the last time you two had sex."

Phil didn't blush, but he did sigh. He had a pretty good idea where the psychiatrist was going with this, so he took a breath and started. "Well, that was last night. We went to bed together, like we usually do on nights that we're home."

"What are you wearing to sleep in these days?"

"Still a sleeveless undershirt and boxer-briefs. Clint sleeps naked."

Dr. Waite nodded, "Go on."

"Ah, so we cuddled up, as usual, Clint's back to my chest, and I started to touch him."

"How?"

"Just stroking his skin at first, running my hand over his chest and stomach."

"Clint, tell Phil how it feels when he touches you like that."

"It feels amazing." Clint turned to face Phil, his eyes bright and his smile warm. "You're behind me, holding me close, and it feels so warm and safe and comfortable. There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be than in your arms. And then when you start to touch me, it feels so good. I love your hands on me, the fact that you know all the little sensitive spots that make me shiver, and you touch each one of them, because you want to make me feel good. It makes me feel loved and wanted and it turns me on." Months of going to Phil's sessions had taught Clint to express himself and his emotions in a way he'd never been able to before. It was good for both of them.

Dr. Waite turned to Phil, "Please continue."

"After I stroked his skin for a while, I started to play with Clint's nipples, brushing them with my thumb and fingertips the way he likes."

“How do you know what he likes, does he tell you?”

“Sometimes, yes. Sometimes he’ll say when something feels good, but mostly I just know by the noises he makes while I’m touching him.” Dr. Wait nodded, but didn’t say anything, so Phil continued. “Ah, then I slid my hand down to his cock and touched it lightly. Not trying to make him come, yet, just teasing, making him feel good.”

“And what were you feeling, Phil, while you were doing that to Clint?”

“Happy. Contented. Warm. Safe. Aroused.”

“What made you feel aroused?”

Phil cracked a smile at that. “Having a naked Clint Barton moaning in my arms is pretty much guaranteed to make me feel aroused.” Then he answered more seriously. “The feel of his skin, touching him, touching his cock and feeling and hearing his response to what I was doing. Knowing that I was turning him on, making him hard.”

“And what form did your arousal take?”

“I, ah, became erect,” Phil said, a blush starting at the tips of his ears despite the fact that he’d described his sex life to Dr. Waite many times before.

Clint laughed. “You got a big hard boner.”

“And what did you do with your big hard boner, Phil?” Dr. Waite asked, and they all laughed.

“I moved so that Clint could roll onto his back. I straddled him. I kissed him and rubbed against him. I took my cock out through the fly of my underwear and wrapped my hand around both of our big hard boners,” he grinned again. “And I kissed Clint and stroked us together until we both came.”

“And that was ‘pretty good’?”

Phil sighed, knowing he was in for some very uncomfortable questions next. “No, it was awesome.”

“So?” Dr. Waite was making him do all the work, as usual.

“So I guess I’d just prefer to be able to have sex with the man I love without wearing clothes. I’d like to have more options for things we can do together, instead of just me stroking us off. I want him to be able to touch me.” Phil blew out his breath in frustration. “I want to fuck him.” There, he’d said it.

“What, specifically, is stopping you from doing that, Phil?”

“I… I love the idea of it, of how it would feel to be inside him. But whenever I think about actually doing it. Whenever I try to picture actually p…” Phil stopped and took two long, slow, calming breaths. “Penetrating him, my anxiety spikes and I start to hyperventilate.”

Clint had put his hand, palm up, on the sofa cushion between them while Phil had been talking. He took it now and squeezed tight.

“I need to caution you against making penetrative sex a goal in your relationship.”

“I know.” Phil squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “I love you Clint, and I know you’re happy with what we have together. I believe that. I really do. It’s just that…” He opened his eyes and looked at the psychiatrist. “I used to love fucking. I want it. I want it back and they took it away from me and it’s not fair.” Phil knew he sounded like a two year old having a temper tantrum but he couldn’t help it. He blinked away tears of shame and frustration, and clung to Clint’s hand.

It was Clint who spoke next. “No. It’s not fair. It royally sucks. And you’re allowed to be angry about it. You’re allowed to hit things, or break down and cry, or spend an hour or a day or a week just being pissed off about it. You don’t have to be strong all the time, Phil. Not for me. Not anymore. You’ve been strong for me since the day we met. Let me be strong for you now.”

Phil let out a sob and threw himself into Clint’s arms. Clint held him tightly, murmuring something in his ear, but he was crying too hard to hear what it was. He knew he should feel ashamed at breaking down like this, but he didn’t. It felt so damn good to let it out. To cry and be held in Clint’s strong arms. To be able to admit weakness, and know that it was okay. That he was still loved.

His crying jag lasted a couple of minutes and when he finally lifted his face from Clint’s shoulder to look him in the face, Clint smiled at him and kissed him softly and then said quietly but fiercely, “Don’t you dare apologize.”

“Okay,” Phil said with a small smile of his own.

“Here,” Dr. Waite held out a box of tissues and Phil and Clint each took a couple. She waited until they both finished dabbing their eyes and Phil had wiped his nose. “Would you like to tell Clint something about what you’re feeling, Phil?”

Phil took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m okay. I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.”

“When I… when I had therapy right after it happened, there was no one in my life. No one I could lean on. No one to hold me when I needed to cry. So my coping strategies, all the ones I developed, were based on that. On being alone. I don’t want you to think I didn’t trust you to understand. It just… never occurred to me that I had the option, until now. Thank you. For everything.”

“You don’t have to–” Clint stopped himself and threw a quick glance at Dr. Waite. “You’re welcome. I love you and I want to do everything I can to help. My shoulder’s always available. Well,” Clint’s face twisted a little. “Except in the middle of missions and stuff, but you know that already.”

Phil clasped Clint's hand in his again and squeezed it tightly. "That reminds me," he said to Dr. Waite. I might not be here for our next session. I'm leaving for New Mexico first thing tomorrow morning and I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"That's fine, just call my secretary, as usual."

Phil nodded and stood up, his hand still in Clint's. Clint let himself be pulled up off the sofa and he waved at Dr. Waite as Phil led him out of her office.

"So, I was thinking of making chicken alfredo for supper, what do you think?" Clint asked in the car on the way home.

"I think I love your chicken alfredo, but I'd also love to order in and eat in front of the TV and go to bed early."

"Oh?" Clint looked over at Phil and waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Yes." Phil smiled at him then looked back at the road. "I'm leaving first thing tomorrow, and I don't know how long I'll be away. I'd like as much naked Clint as I can get before then."

"Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 7: Epilogue

Snapshots on the Long Road Home

Epilogue

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"You better call it, Coulson. 'Cause I'm starting to root for this guy."

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"Natasha, Barton's been compromised."

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After the battle, after the shawarma, after someone had told Clint that Phil was dead and he'd tried to get to Nick Fury's office to demand proof. After he'd been held in an interrogation cell for 42 hours (he'd counted) and slept for none of them. After three SHIELD psychiatrists, two doctors, and a bunch of the guys from the research labs had run every test they could think of and agreed that as far as they could tell, Clint was… Clint. After he'd made a formal request to see Dr. Waite (he knew he'd be spending a lot of time talking to a psychiatrist, no matter what happened, and he'd rather it be someone he already knew, and trusted), and one to see Director Fury, and one to see someone from the legal department about the fact that he and Phil were each other's next-of-kin, and didn't that mean he was entitled to… something...

After he'd held it together because he couldn't let go, not yet, not before he knew for sure… Nick Fury himself told the guard to open Clint's cell, and jerked his head for Clint to follow him down to a dark corridor at the very back of the medical wing.

Fury stopped at a door and turned.

"Everybody says that as far as they can tell, Loki's completely out of your head, and you're you again. That true?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes. I mean, when he was in my head everything was blue. Now it's not. I could feel him there, now I can't. Can't tell you it's not a big trick, because it could be, but I don't think it is. I think he's really gone."

Fury stared at him for long enough that Clint considered leaning against the wall for support, because he wasn't sure how much longer he was gonna be able to stay upright on his own.

"Do you love Phil Coulson?" Fury's one-eyed stare was the darkest, most dangerous thing Clint had ever seen in his life, and that was saying a lot, but he held it steadily.

"With all of my heart and soul."
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Fury stared at him some more, then nodded to himself. “Come on then.” He ran a swipe card through the lock on the door and strode in. Clint followed.

Lying in a hospital bed connected to enough machinery to fly the space shuttle was Phil. Or, rather, was a body that would have looked just like Phil, if it hadn’t looked more dead than alive. But the machinery beeped and whooshed, and Clint could see Phil’s chest rising and falling rhythmically and the little peaks of the readout on the heart monitor dancing evenly across the screen.

“Is he really alive, or is this just…” ‘So I can say goodbye,’ was the next part of that sentence in Clint’s heart, but his head knew that SHIELD wouldn’t have done all of this just for him.

“Barely. The doctors have done everything they can, it’s up to him now, to choose to fight and live. Talk to him. Tell him to fight,” Fury said. “Tell him…” he fell silent looking at his friend lying in the bed. Clint liked Nick Fury more in that moment than he ever had before.

Clint crossed to the bed and carefully picked up one of Phil’s hands, the one that had fewer tubes attached. He leaned over and kissed it softly, then started to talk.

“Hey, Phil. I’m here. I’m okay. Nat knocked some sense into me, as usual. We, uh, won. You would’ve been so proud of how we fought together. Like a real team.” Clint’s voice broke on the last syllable and he swallowed a sob. “I need you to get better, Phil. I can’t lose you. Not now. I love you, Phil.” He ran out of words and kissed Phil’s hand again. There was a scraping sound behind him. Fury had pulled up a chair and put it by the bed.

“Access, 24/7, unless the doctors say otherwise for medical reasons,” Fury said, dropping the keycard on the bed.

Clint knew his eyes were red when he looked up, but he didn’t care. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well. I need my one good eye back.”

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Clint slept in the chair next to Phil’s bed for three days. On the fourth, Natasha showed up with clean clothes for him, followed by an orderly carrying a cot and setting it up in the corner of Phil’s room. Clint didn’t know if Fury had told her about Phil, or if Nat had just figured it out on her own though a combination of spying on people and intimidating them, the way she usually did. Anyway, he was grateful, and said so.

“How is he?” Nat asked, looking at Phil’s motionless figure.

“The, uh, doctors are keeping him in a medical coma for a week to help everything heal. We won’t really know anything until they try to wake him up,” Clint said tiredly.

Natasha nodded. “I’ll sit with him for a bit. You go take a shower and eat.”

“I’m okay.”
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“You are not. You stink.” He expression softened. “He needs you to be strong for him, Clint. You have to eat and sleep.”

“Yeah. I guess a shower would be a good idea.”

With Natasha bullying him to eat and sleep and work out regularly and Dr. Waite talking him through his guilt and fear, Clint was as prepared as possible for the day the doctors tried to rouse Phil from his coma.

“Touch him and talk to him,” one of the nurses said gently. “It will help him find his way back.” Clint thought that was an odd way to phrase it, but it made sense. Clint knew only too well what nightmares Phil might have been living through for the past week.

“Time to wake up now, Phil.” Clint said, holding Phil’s hand and stroking it. “Come on, you’ve slept for long enough. I need you to wake up for me now.”

Phil’s eyelids twitched and his grip on Clint’s hand tightened.

“That’s it Phil. You can do it, I know you can. Open your eyes for me.” Clint desperately tried to hold back his tears. He didn’t want the first thing Phil saw to be him crying.

“Clint.” Phil’s eyes were still closed, and his voice was a harsh whisper, but the noise he had made was definitely Clint’s name.

“I’m here Phil. I’m okay. You’re hurt but you’re going to be fine. We won. Loki is gone.”

“Not dead?” Phil still hadn’t opened his eyes.

“No. We, uh, captured him and Thor took him back to Asgard.”

“Fuck.”

Clint laughed at that. “Yeah, well, they have more experience dealing with the slimy little bastard, and a prison that can actually hold him.”

Phil finally opened his eyes and turned his head a fraction so that he could look at Clint.

“You’re okay? It’s really you?”

“It’s really me. Nat and Fury and a half-dozen doctors and scientists say so. I love you Phil, I love you so much.” Clint stopped fighting the tears then, and let them slip down his face. Phil’s hand tightened further on his.

“Hey, hey c’mere,” he said and weakly tried to tug Clint towards him. With a sob, Clint laid his head carefully on the undamaged side of Phil’s chest. The feeling of Phil slowly petting his hair made him cry even harder. After a minute he sniffed and swallowed and tried to pull himself together.

“Sorry. You’re the one that’s hurt. I’m supposed to be taking care of you,” he said, lifting his head to look at Phil.

The slow, gentle caress of Phil's fingers through his hair didn't stop. "How about we take turns taking care of each other?" Phil said with a small smile.

"That sounds just about perfect."

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The next six weeks were full of endless tests and agonizingly small steps forward. Of daily physio and Phil pushing himself too hard and getting frustrated. Of Clint hating to see him hurting but learning when to stand back. After the first couple of weeks, Clint moved out of Phil's hospital room, but still refused to go back to their apartment at night, instead he stayed in a spare room in the SHIELD barracks. There he got the occasional sidelong look from an agent who'd been on the helicarrier during the battle, but Clint had long ago learned how not to worry too much about what other people thought of him. Phil trusted him. And Nat, and Fury. Everyone else could go fuck themselves.

He was too busy, anyway, between his own training, and being there to help for Phil's physio, and his appointments with Dr. Waite, and various follow-ups that some of the science-types wanted to do. It was annoying, to have electrodes attached to his head for a few hours every week while they tried to see Loki's ghost in his brain waves, or whatever the hell it was they were trying to do, but Clint put up with it. He wasn't in the stockade, and Phil was alive. Everything else, as far as Clint was concerned, was gravy.

And at last, the glorious day came when Phil could walk a mile on the treadmill without getting out of breath, and the doctors said that he could go home.

"So, what do you want to do first?" Clint asked as soon as their apartment door was locked behind them and he'd tossed their bags into the bedroom.

"I don't know, just…" Phil was looking around the room a little dazed.

"Just what, Phil?" Clint asked gently.

"Could we maybe just cuddle on the sofa for a bit? I've missed that."

"Me too. So much. How's this?" Clint had thrown himself into the corner of the sofa and spread his arms open wide.

"Perfect." Phil sat down and leaned against Clint's chest. "Even though I have to go back to Medical tomorrow, and the day after, and they day after that, for god knows how long, still, this is… It feels so good to finally be home."

Clint hummed his agreement into Phil's hair and planted a soft kiss on his temple. "I never said it, 'cause I thought you might… well, anyway. The reason I stayed on base with you until now is that in my head this is still your apartment, and it's only home to me when you're here. Because you're here. Something like that."

Phil nodded against Clint's chest. "I know 'home' isn't… easy for you. Maybe in a while, once everything's back to normal, we should look for a new place together? One that we both
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choose? Your name on the lease with mine? What do you think?"

Clint thought that sounded like something he wasn't ready to think about yet, and he told Phil so. "I don't mean I'm not ready to get a new apartment with you. I mean I'm not ready to think about when things are back to normal, whatever that means."

"I understand," Phil said, and he picked up one of Clint's hands from where it had been resting warmly on his hip and kissed the back of it. Then he yawned.

"It's been a long day for both of us," Clint said. "Are you about ready for bed?"

"I think so."

"I came in last week and washed all the sheets and towels and everything, so nothing's funky."

"Thank you." Phil was already heading for the bedroom, stripping off his tie as he went.

"Thank Nat, she was the one who mentioned that it would be a good idea. You grab the bathroom first. I'll lock up."

When Clint finished his turn in the bathroom and padded into the bedroom in his underwear, he stopped short at the sight of Phil shirtless, and in the process of taking off his boxers.

"Phil?"

"Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping in my own bed with the man I love for the first time in far, far too long," Phil said.

"No, I mean what's up with, uh…" Clint felt silly gesturing at Phil's body, afraid to say 'with you being naked' as if Phil would suddenly notice and freak out, but he did it anyway.

"I can put some clothes on if you prefer," Phil said with the little quirk of a smile that made it very clear he'd been planning this.

"No, I mean, not unless you want to, obviously. So you're, uh, okay with…" Clint floundered again.

"With you seeing my scars? Yes, considering that you saw them every day for two weeks when I was still hooked up to a bunch of tubes and sleeping most of the time." Phil climbed into bed and patted the pillow next to him in invitation.

Clint still hesitated "Yeah, but that was… I guess I figured that was because you were in Medical. You told me, a long time ago, that you were okay being naked for the docs in medical, and I just figured that you felt safe there, and that was why…"

“It was. But now that you’ve seen everything there is to see…” Phil sighed and leaned back against his pillow. Clint gave up his dithering and climbed in next to him which seemed to make Phil relax. “That’s not all of it, of course. Dr. Waite has been poking quite hard at that particular corner of my psyche for the last few weeks. There’s stuff about my upbringing, and internalized homophobia, and my self-image as a man, and how all of that relates to my reaction to having been raped all those years ago, and my decision to go up against Loki alone armed with an experimental weapon–”

“Which I’m still mad at you for, by the way. Which Dr. Waite says is understandable, but I need to work through,” Clint grinned.

“Of course. And there’s even some more philosophical and esoteric stuff about dying, and coming back from the dead, and being reborn, and the new scars overwriting the old ones, and we can talk about all of it tomorrow, if you want to. But right now, I just want to curl up with you and feel your skin against mine, and fall asleep together.”

“I’d,” Clint’s voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “I’d like that a lot.”

Phil leaned in and kissed him, then said, “Roll over.”

Clint did, and felt Phil spooning behind him, pressed close, skin against skin from shoulders to knees. Phil’s arm came around his chest and held him snugly.

“This okay?”

“Perfect. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

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“Just promise me you won’t be disappointed if I don’t, ah…”

Clint grinned. “Rise to the occasion? Don’t worry. You explained all about the blood pressure medication. Twice. So I get that even though the docs cleared you for sex, it might not actually work yet. I’m still game to try if you are.”

It had been six months since Loki. Six months since Clint had unwittingly led the attack on the helicarrier. Six months since Phil had died, and then come back. Six months since an army from outer space had rained terror on New York and a motley band of unlikely heroes had saved the world. It had been six months since Clint and Phil had had sex.

As soon as he was able, Phil had offered Clint a hand job, and after refusing the first few times, Clint had relented and allowed Phil to pull him through a fierce orgasm. But until today, sex had been on Phil’s ‘banned activities’ list (along with ‘lifting anything that weighs over 50 pounds,’ and ‘going after deranged demigods with experimental SHIELD weapons.’)

On this bright Saturday morning, they lay in bed naked and facing each other, legs tangled together, kissing slowly. One of Phil’s hands was in Clint’s hair, longer and shaggier now that he hadn’t been on an active mission in months. Clint’s hands were on Phil’s back. He had
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touched Phil's chest a few times, but it still made them both a little nervous, and besides, most of the scar tissue didn't have any sensation, so there wasn't much point. Instead Clint kneaded the smooth planes of Phil's back where atrophied muscles were just starting to return to their former definition.

Clint was already mostly hard, his cock digging into Phil's abdomen. Phil took his own still-soft cock and Clint's hard one in his free hand and stroked them together slowly.

"I'm just going to do this for a bit and see if, ah, anything happens," Phil said, feeling self-conscious about his own lack of response.

"Sure. Whatever you want." Clint went back to kissing him.

But when a couple of minutes of slow stroking still didn't produce any results, Phil made a frustrated noise.

"Hey, it's okay," Clint said, tilting his head back so that he could look Phil in the eye. "I'm not disappointed or anything."

"I am. No… not disappointed. Frustrated. Annoyed. I feel cheated, again. We'd just started having some kind of sex regularly when–"

"When everything went to hell, and I got compromised, and you nearly died. I know. It's not fair." Clint stuck out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout.

Phil smiled and leaned his forehead against Clint's, his hand still curled around both their cocks.

"Is there anything I can do?" Clint asked.

"Talk to me."

"Okay, about what?"

"Tell me about one of your fantasies."

"Wow. Um, okay. Let me think for a minute here…"

"Why, got so many that you need time to choose one?" Phil leered at him.

"Well, I've got a few, yes, but… Okay. So, after we started having sex like this," Clint glanced down to indicate Phil's hand around their cocks, "Which I really, really like, by the way, I, uh, kinda started thinking—promise you won't get upset?"

"Promise." Phil's hand started to move again, stroking slowly, by way of assurance.

"I kinda assumed that this was probably what we'd be doing for… for a while. So I started thinking about the future. Our future. This was before the most recent major unfairness, of course."

“Of course.”

“So I have this fantasy where it’s maybe ten years from now. We're older, obviously. We're doing different jobs at SHIELD: you've taken over from Fury and I'm doing mostly tactical planning stuff rather than fieldwork, but we still go out into the field from time-to-time when they need a couple of badasses to save the world. But in my fantasy, we're not saving the world—we just did, and now we've got some time off, and it's a lazy Sunday morning, and we've just woken up after some awesome sex the night before and a solid 8 hours sleep, and we roll over to face each other, just like this, and we kiss.” Clint paused and leaned forward to take Phil’s mouth in a deep kiss, and Phil moaned. His cock twitched in his hand.

Clint kissed him for another minute, then pulled back. “It’s easy and familiar,” he said, breathless, “but still completely wonderful, just like this. And you wrap your hand around both our cocks, and stroke us both, just like you’re doing now. And I’m looking into your eyes and thinking about how lucky I am to have you. How glad I am that we got here. How much I love you.”

Phil looked into Clint’s shining eyes and couldn’t help but surge forward to kiss him again and again, hard and demanding, conscious of what he’d—what they—had almost lost; not to Loki, but to his own fear of taking this chance. Phil was fully hard now against Clint, his hand moving faster, pumping them both frantically.

“Clint.”

“Yeah, Phil. Yeah. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

“Yes. Oh, Clint. Yes.” Phil’s body went taut in Clint’s arms and Clint pushed into the slick warm wetness chasing his own release. It only took a couple of thrusts until he was coming into Phil’s fist as well.

They both lay panting for a couple of minutes, until eventually Phil rolled onto his back.

“Well, that was okay, then,” he said.

Clint looked over at him with a grin. “I’d swat you with a pillow, but I can’t move right now.”

“Well I’m sure as hell not getting up to get a washcloth.”

Clint flailed for a the box of tissues on the nightstand. He dropped it on Phil’s chest and helped himself to a couple. Phil giggled.

“What?”

“I’m better.”

“Well, yeah.”

“No, I mean, you just dropped a box of kleenex on my chest as if my heart hadn’t been stitched back together by three surgeons. You really believe that I’m okay.”

Clint looked at him, eyebrows raised. “I guess I do,” he said, and smiled.

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

They got out of bed and Clint cooked brunch and they ate. Then Phil washed the dishes and Clint did the laundry. Later they curled up on the sofa, Phil sitting up with a book and Clint with his head on Phil’s lap and a game on his tablet. When he was turning a page, Phil glanced down to see that the tablet had gone to sleep in Clint’s hand, and he was staring off into space.

Phil marked his page and put his book down. “You’ve been quiet all day,” he said, putting his hand on Clint’s arm and stroking gently with his thumb.

“I’m not sure I'm ready to talk about it.” Clint put his tablet down, but his eyes stayed on the far wall.

“I understand. You know there's nothing you could say, nothing you could tell me that would make me feel any differently towards you. I love you,” Phil said.

“I know. I love you too, Phil.” There was a long pause, and then an audible breath. “My fantasy, there was more to it.”

“But you're not sure if you're ready to tell me the rest,” Phil said quietly.

"Yeah."

“That’s okay. I understand.”

“You really don’t. But I know what you’re trying to say.” Clint took another deep breath. “I think I need to tell you though. It’s going to make me crazy otherwise.”

“If that’s what you want.”

Clint nodded, and snuggled against Phil’s arm for a minute, then started to talk. “In my fantasy, after we come, you roll onto your back, gasping for air, smiling. And then you put out your left hand. And I'm lying on my stomach, looking at you all sated and happy. I’m so happy I could burst. And I put my left hand in yours, and I say, 'I love you and I want to be with you.' We've said it so often now, for so long, but it still makes me thrill every time I say it, and every time I hear you say it back to me.”

On cue, Phil said, “I love you and I want to be with you.”

“I love you and I want to be with you,” Clint said back to him softly, then was quiet again for a long time. Phil wasn’t sure if he was going to say anything else, but he kept slowly stroking Clint’s arm with slow sweeps of his thumb. Then Clint’s head tilted up so that he could look into Phil’s face, and very softly he said, “And in my fantasy I look down at where we're holding hands, and we're wearing rings.”

Phil didn’t say anything for a moment, taking his time to choose his words very carefully. “I’ve thought about it. Us getting married, I mean. I've thought about it. I… I didn't know if it was something you'd want.”

“I… if you…” Clint seemed to flounder, but Phil waited. In an even smaller, quieter voice, Clint said, “I think… I think maybe it is.”

"We could start talking about it."

“Yeah. Talking. That would be good. Maybe not right away, though. It might take me a while to deal with having told you it's something I want.”

“I'm not going anywhere. Take all the time you need.”

Clint reached across to where Phil’s hand was resting on his arm, and threaded their fingers together.

"I love you, and I want to be with you."

"I love you, and I want to be with you."

End Notes

Find me on Tumblr at: Jo Mathieson and on Imzy at: Purple Passion

NOTES:
There is no non-con between Clint & Phil, no "on screen" non-con, no infidelity, no major character death, no kink, and the story has a happy ending. If that's enough to reassure you, you can now scroll back up and read without being spoiled. If you have specific questions about any type of content, you can email me: jmathieson.fic@gmail.com I will happily answer any questions about content if that will allow you to read the story. **The content/trigger warnings (and spoilers) that follow below are for the entire story, not just this chapter!**

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Content/Trigger Warnings: PTSD, nightmares, vomiting, anxiety, sexual dysfunction (male impotence), torture (past, not explicitly described) rape (past, not C/C, not explicitly described), panic attacks, scars, body shyness, psychiatric treatment/therapy, references to domestic abuse (past, not C/C), threat of harm to children (no harm).

Story context: Phil exhibits some PTSD behaviours. In particular, he doesn't like to be touched. He also suffers from nightmares and anxiety. Eventually he reveals to Clint that he is impotent due to having been tortured and raped in captivity during a long-ago mission. The rape is never explicitly described, though certain details of it are mentioned, and both Phil's and Clint's emotional reaction to it are described in detail. As a result of the rape, Phil has nightmares and panic attacks. When Clint and Phil eventually do get together, their level of intimacy (touching and sex) is limited by Phil's PTSD, though this improves towards the end of the story as they both attend therapy.

If you have specific questions about these warnings or any other content issue, you can email me: jmathieson.fic@gmail.com I will happily answer any questions about content!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!